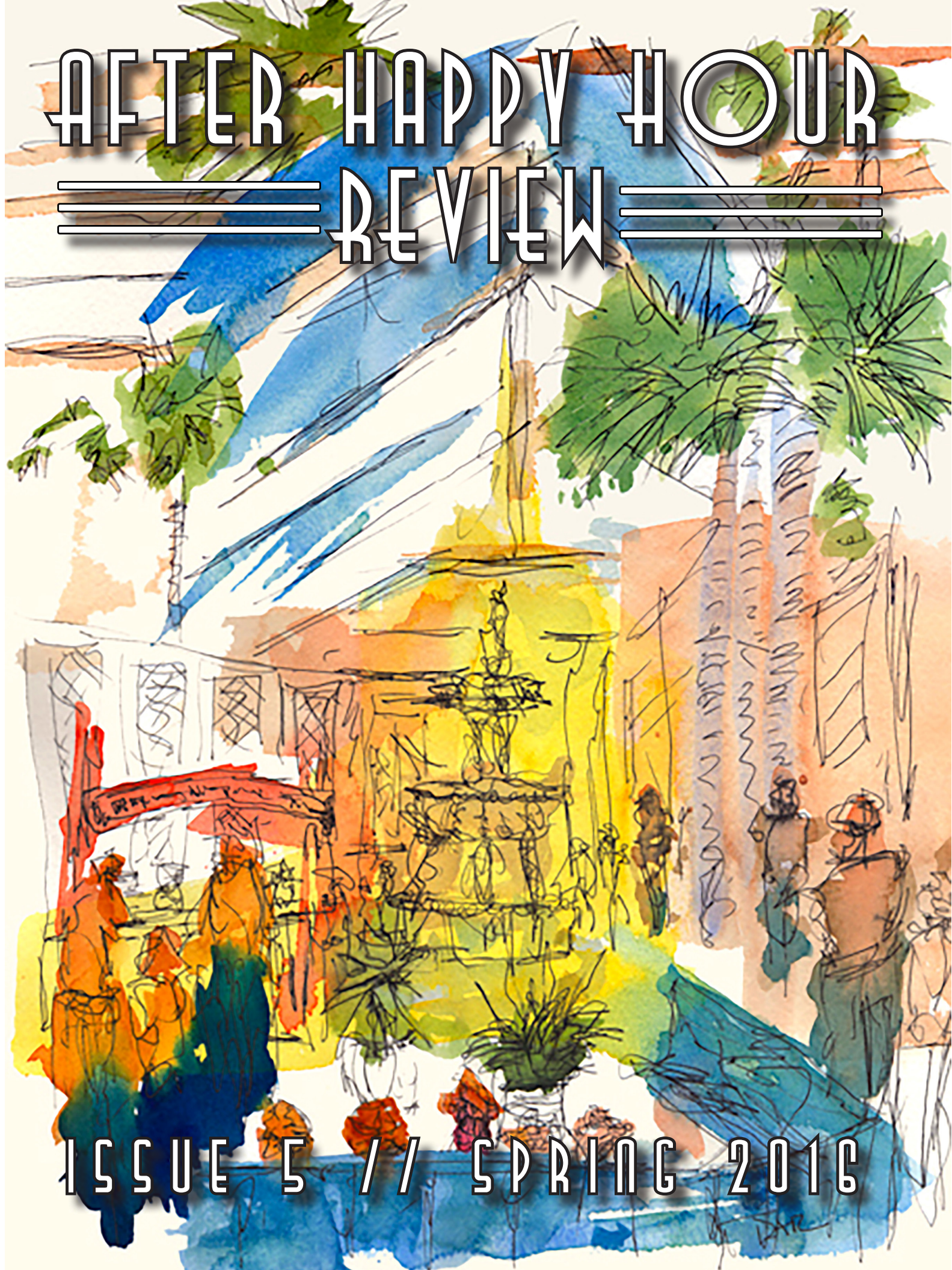


AFTER HAPPY HOUR REVIEW



ISSUE 5 // SPRING 2016



AFTER
HAPPY
HOUR
REVIEW

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

It's my pleasure to introduce you to this issue of *The After Happy Hour Review*. In a city rich with literary groups and traditions, I'm lucky to be a small part of this one. Three years and five issues deep, *The Hour after Happy Hour* Writing Group is still a growing community, one that's both generous and inclusive. *After Happy Hour* suggests a warm glow, a buzz in the bloodstream, and an appreciation for good company after a long day of work. And there's plenty of good company in this issue:

There's the beautifully weird syntax of H. Gan's "Transit," which perfectly evokes the grime and blur of travel before concluding with a pitch-perfect image. There's the pretty contradiction in Kim Mckannich's paintings, the way they remain stark even as their warm colors and lines suggest a frenzy.

This issue walks a fine balance between staying true to the journal's Pittsburgh roots and reaching beyond them. With "Spirit Lodge, Saturday Night," local literary hero Kristofer Collins writes, "When in doubt return to what you know best" before showing readers a darker vision of a familiar Lawrenceville bar. The poem melts away, and we're reminded that even here, everything is changing. Everything is in transit.

Vidushi Chaudhry leads us away from the Pittsburgh winter (and the Pittsburgh spring, which is apparently the same thing this year) with his poems, which float the reader out of the cold with memories of India; glowing tangerine peels, "the citrus oils dense as chrism"; and a holy mixture of asphalt, olives, and soil.

This issue is bursting with talent. If I weren't impatient for you to see for yourself, I'd spend the next few pages talking about the sharp portraiture in Ralph Culver's poems, the metaphoric shadings of Jiadai Lin's "Black Hole," or the gentle-yet-powerful use of color in Julie Standig's "Funny The Things We Recall."

And as best as I can recall, some of my fondest memories were made in blurry, noisy rooms. This journal re-creates that atmosphere perfectly—you can almost hear the clink of ice in the highball glass, the bursts of laughter or song.

And because the bartender's waiting for me, I'd like to say: here, take a seat. We've been waiting for you.

—Robert Yune





DENNIS ROTH

Ain't Callin' Me Baby, Better Say My Name

BY JOHN ARIAS

who knows if Sekhmet had lapped up that sun-
mulled, blood-tinted wine like I had you
had she floated down that marble staircase as Gloria Swanson had
her bones as hollow as the seven-hundred marrow statues I built
for you at your altar? that's just how deep everything goes, I cried
even time reaches there; even the purity of black holes are empty-
bellied and starving for you



ALLEN FORREST

Transit

BY H. GAN

When I come in from Tucson I smell like a diner. In the evenings outside tribal dance studios I am approached by men who won't look me in the eye and who ask me if I know where they can find some weed. "You're asking the wrong lady," I tell them, amused, and they mutter vague thanks, feet already moving in the next likeliest direction. I may be my only friend unfamiliar with cocaine. I smell like grease rising. I smell like broken yolks.

To say you have a predilection for the cheap and gaudy is a massive understatement. What kind of grown man with a full income at his disposal still

drinks Olde English? Your diamond watch is hideous. But when you told me your green felt-backed, oak-framed clock with the actual billiard balls for numbers had made it to Little Rock and was now hanging on your wall equipped with a new set of D batteries, I cried.

The mercury thermometer on the wall of the observatory at the summit of Mount Lemmon reads thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit. I can't feel my toes. On the bus in the dusty winterish light is a man with a camera who sends my ovaries into a headlong search for their lipstick. His name is Jack, his name is your name—his name has me wondering if, the first time around, I had the name right and the man wrong. His jeans fall over his boots in the same way that he smiles. He takes pictures of the light from the telescope reflecting off my cornea. There are at least three lenses between his eyes and mine but I can't see what I'm looking at.

Ashley says her best friend is a lesbian. I say that sounds nice. I say it probably helps to remind her to appreciate the female gender and its beauty. I have a man best friend and that helps sometimes, but mostly Peter bats me around with sheathed claws. Ashley says she appreciates the female gender already and that every girl has a little diva in her. Privately I think I don't really diva. I bulldog.

To me you live, a permanent transient, in a land of gas station counters, dealing in Marlboro 27s, plastic bottles of Pepsi, and loose change with the painfully inefficient older ladies who were once mediocre phlebotomists. These counters are your home, and rest stops, too, but mostly the convenient places that offer the necessities of travel from the palms of fluorescent-lit industrial displays. You are the Castor to my Pollux, my Gemini twin, my crossroads brother. You were born on my first birthday, under

the governance of Mercury, the winged messenger: god of thieves, god of commerce, and god of travelers.

This new Jack—I would like to see him unwound. I would like to play in his chest hair. I am too bloodless for this. He stretched out his legs to rest against mine under the table and all I wondered was whether he was having trouble digesting his gravy fries. I can't make a slinky walk down the stairs. Coils of any kind are a skill I lack.

At the Cowpony there is a barfight at the next table and the man who got punched faucets blood like vomit onto one of the pool tables. I wonder about hazmat procedures while the other writers laugh. Ashley says, "That's what the Cowpony's about," and the bouncer fist-bumps her and says, "That girl's got it straight." I don't think men making each other bleed is very funny but I don't say that. I don't think midgets are any funnier than blood but the rest of the bar does. I order a drink. The man I want leaves early and afterwards four separate guys try to feel me up on the dance floor and my friends raise their eyebrows at me. I think that's pretty funny. One guy asks me what I'm in school for and I say, "Creative writing." He says he didn't know you could go to school for that. I ask him if he reads books and he says no and asks for my number anyway. I think that's pretty funny, too. I must smell like blue blood.

In the meantime I might die of a caffeine overdose. Sleep becomes a Siberian work camp and I wake up in knots.

The myth of Gemini: Zeus took form as a swan to seduce Leda, wife of the Spartan king. This interspecies liaison produced two eggs, from which hatched Castor, the mortal son of the king, and Pollux, the immortal son

of the king of the gods. The brothers, dearest friends, sailed with the Argo in search of the Golden Fleece and became fearless adventurers. When Castor was killed in battle, Pollux sacrificed half his immortality to share it with his brother, allowing them to remain together forever, alternating between the abodes of Mt. Olympus and Hades. In honor of the twins' great regard for one another, the gods hung their likeness in the sky.

My mother calls and says she's thinking of leaving my father. This is unexpected but not for the normal reasons. "I think that's a good idea," I say. We get into the hairy details. "Everything I'm mad at him about, I've done, too," she says. "What?" I say. "I had an affair, too," she says, "I thought I told you that." I have to sit down because I'm laughing so hard. It occurs to me I could spend a whole life trying to stand on Ptolemaic theories.

A person's sun sign is determined by which zodiac constellation frames the sun from the vantage point of Earth at the time of birth. The constellation Gemini, the sign of those of us born in late May and early June, won't be seen in the night sky until November.

I wonder why I hate that girl so much. Is it because she talks quietly enough to Jack that he has to lean in close to hear her, sneaks in under his chin with her bad posture like a pale blue hyena? But I hated her before that—I even met her first, and she repulsed me then, with her insipid smile and Midwest curls and big rabbit eyes. What part of me does she remind me of? The part that is nice to other women even when I want to fuck their boyfriends. The part that doesn't dance.

I have to stage whole monologues in my head—interventions regarding

my wardrobe choices. Woman, I say, you're twenty-five. Absent a whole lot of cash, free time, and plastic surgery, you will never have this body again. Your ass is a shelf. You live in Arizona: wear a tank top. I stopped enjoying being stared at in November of 2011. Men still push their hips against mine on dance floors when I'm wearing jeans and a long-sleeved button-down, and I own fourteen skirts I haven't worn.

My mother reads me a paragraph she wrote at a writing conference. "Writing's so cathartic," she says, as if she is the first to notice this property of writing. They asked her, "What does your writing taste like?" She wrote: It's flinty and metallic. It flows and scabs over. My writing tastes like blood.

At the grocery store, I'm reading the ingredients on prepackaged salad greens and in my periphery I spot a mealy-faced guy in a bowler hat. He has a raincoat buttoned up to his neck and his eyes glued to the floor and he immediately makes me wonder how I'll duck when he pulls his Uzi out and how the fuck I'm going to manage to crawl away from his strategic position by the in-store bank. I try to catch his eye so I can smile at him preemptively but then I remember that I can't make anybody like me even if I try and if there are no salad greens. I wonder if I'll drag a trail of blood.

For this stargazing excursion I have brought the following items of clothing: one pair of white cotton socks; one pair of blue jeans; one pair of white cotton underwear; one white push-up bra; two tank tops; one white polyester-blend sweater; one grey cotton sweater; one blue hoodie; one padded pink corduroy jacket; one pair of brown leather driving gloves; one green and brown wool hat with ear flaps and a pom-pom on top; and one

pair of brown leather boots which I wore when we took the train to New York and got drunk in a blues bar at one in the afternoon and then returned to accidentally smear blood across the sheets of our hotel bed.

The first star we saw in the telescope, before we went out to see the green flash at sunset, was Vega, whose drop below the horizon was used by the Romans to mark the beginning of fall, and which is bright enough to be seen at any time with a telescope. For all I know the actual star has exploded by now since the light I see is 25 years old.

At fourteen I knew enough to be jealous of my step-cousin Christy and her body. At sixteen I knew enough to get over it and get to know her as a person—she wore leopard-print skirts and drove a black Mustang too fast and once left a guy on the side of the freeway in LA because she was sick of his shit. At nineteen I knew enough to accept that I had my New York Slovak body and not her California Italian one, but when we went out in San Diego and I didn't have an ID her boyfriend suggested I use hers. She handed me her license and I laughed because we looked like twins.

Castor, the twin star of Pollux in the constellation Gemini, is actually a visual binary system. With a telescope, it appears to be two stars, one blue and one white. Each of these, however, has been found to be a binary system of its own, and this quadruple system has a close companion, which is, in truth, two red dwarfs. To the naked eye all three pairs appear as one star.

I tell my mother that you and I are speaking regularly again, that maybe you would come for Thanksgiving. She says cautiously, "That's great!" I

know I should let you fade away, but. “But you need the eggs,” says my mother. I have to ask her what that means and she tells me the Woody Allen joke about the psychiatrist and the guy with the brother who thinks he’s a chicken. She sounds sad when she says, “There are many things that people would do if only they didn’t need the eggs.”

Ashley tells about how her friend Selene donated her eggs in exchange for coin. Apparently Selene’s grandparents have all lived into their eighties and none of them has high cholesterol. She sold four eggs for four thousand dollars each but could have sold more because she is young and pretty and still has four grandparents who aren’t dead yet. Ashley tells me that Selene had to do it because she was making twenty thousand dollars a year as a radio DJ with no benefits and God knows twenty thousand dollars is not a livable wage. Ashley makes fifty thousand a year and paid off her credit card bills in six months. I don’t tell her how much I make before eggs, or student loans. Irony has its limits.

In November of 2011 you were sleeping with a noose under your pillow and I was dreaming of the blood-red faces of digital clocks.

A yellow sun and a blue sun glow like coins in the telescopic aether, which is not really black, I can see now. It is only not light. This is a binary star system in which the two stars orbit around each other, guided by the center of their combined mass. The observatory guide, who has a radio announcer’s voice and uses it, shows us a computer simulation of a three-star system, in which blue and yellow and orange lines trace the trajectories of their orbits over billions of years. He says, “If I changed the mass of just one of these hypothetical stars even the tiniest bit, the entire pattern would change.” After a few moments of complex trailblazing the blue

and yellow lines isolate themselves in the upper right of the screen and draw a delicate coil like a strand of hair in the face of gravity. We sigh at the sight of long-term beauty. “You can see they’re still being influenced by the third star from the direction they’re moving,” he says. The orange star, off on its own, waits in the wings.

On the way back to my apartment the mealy-faced guy in the raincoat is standing alone at the bus stop in the rain with his groceries set neatly on the bench and then I feel like an asshole.

A Chinese woman named Shanyue among others and twenty years of dim hotel liaisons is what my father thought about dinner on the table and two healthy smart children and the general institution of marriage. I don’t worry about the line between consciousness and not; I worry about the line of fire. I told Ashley in a tone that surprised even myself that people just walk around inflicting themselves on other people. Even when my also-cheating mother buys me yellow roses she’s just trying to be the mother who remembers. Even when it smells like I’m thinking about you, I’m just thinking about me.

“Some people like to look,” Peter told me, shrugging, when I complained about your roving eyeballs, and for some reason the phrase gave me relief. At a Coyotes game I told you to use your ass-dar to locate the cheerleader in the stands and you looked sideways down at my seat. I remember that game because one of the players spurted half his blood onto the ice. During November of 2013, when you were sleeping in my bed every night, I stopped hating being stared at.

When I come in from Tucson I smell like sunshine and salt. October

opens like the sound of its name and the days are bright as stones in a river. I have a mug on my desk with a blue and gold dragon on the side. I don't get tired of ocotillo blooms or harmonicas in the evening. I have always enjoyed the sound of a ticking clock.

At sunset we trek outside in our boots with binoculars; Jack carries his camera in bare hands and I ask him about his work. The guide talks about the Dark Ages and the disheartening antipathy toward science and Jack mutters, "Not if you were in Baghdad." I nearly fall over out of sheer intellectual lust. While we are waiting for the correct moment, the guide turns us around to face the white wall of the observatory. "What color are shadows, really?" he asks us. We are rendered against the panels in a cold dusky blue.

When you call me to tell me the Phillies lost the championship, I am inviting Jack and the girl I hate to The District for post-telescopic whiskey, and I don't hear my phone. I have to invite her because she has inserted herself into the conversation about how great a hot toddy would be right now and I don't want to look like a bitch. I want to kick her in her clitoris. My ovaries roar. For the first time ever I don't call you back.

Words that do no good, as far as I can tell: My. Should. Any rendition of the phrase, "You make me."

The word humor originates with the Latin *umor*, indicating any of the four bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, choler, or melancholy (the black bile). Hilary, from the Latin *hilaris*, means "cheerful one." Irony, from the Latin *ironia*, originally meant "dissimulation," which is a type of lying in which the truth is concealed rather than falsified, a practice perfected in the Unit-

ed States during the 21st century by pool hustlers and the occasional parent.

I say, “Do you have a The Ex?” He says, “What do you mean?” and I say, “You know, The Ex,” and then it is my turn to throw darts. The darts smell like coins, like too many people have touched them. Like they’ve been around too long. You know. The Ex. The one that leaves you on your knees in their crosshairs. Thunk. The one you tell funny stories about because the real stories still pinch your innards. Thunk. The one named Jack. Thunk. He says, “I’ve got the one I don’t talk to.” Maybe he doesn’t unwind. Maybe he is just the job and upstanding citizen-style divorce. Maybe his chest hair is a sham. Maybe I get to be The Ex. “I have the one I dated for three years,” he offers. Maybe he’s just what I want.

Transits of Mercury occur only in May or November every seven, thirteen, or thirty-three years. On November 13, 1986, when I couldn’t yet walk and you were the size of a chicken egg, Mercury drew its orbit across the face of the sun.

Most of my pieces of self I picture as a flock of ravens in close Hilary formation. They swarm and if I move fast enough for a moment they can’t follow. I am like to claw my own chest to shreds to be rid of them—they blind my eye and stink of regurgitated carrion and fleas. Yesterday I went for my first run in months, trailing jerky shrapnel like balloons on strings, and I wondered what it would look like if I just sat still.

I drink my Jack Daniel’s, completing my orbit, while the girl I hate laughs a lot and whispers in Jack’s ear. I give up and go sit with Ashley in the back by the dartboards, and after a few moments he joins us. When the

girl I hate comes back to say goodbye to me, she lingers awkwardly too long, but Jack says goodbye and she touches his upper arm one last time and leaves. He and Ashley talk about his elderly landlord who keeps a rap sheet of the next-door fraternity's offenses. I wonder about atmospheric haze and ternary systems and the effects of my mass. I wonder who is in the coil.

How does this fit with my Stoicism? Jack wants to know. Well, it doesn't—I should probably be celibate or married, not climbing into his lap while he's sitting drinking Tennessee whiskey in my old leather armchair. He picks me up and carries me into the bedroom. His body is covered in freckles like small stars. I have Gemini in birthmarks on my left wrist. I am not this Jack's twin.

The best way to get a man to stop staring is to look him in the eye for a full count of four.

My students, on the day of the final exam, say, "We never really answered that question the professor asked on the first day. Why should we care about literature?" I say, "Well, why don't you?" They tell me it takes less time to watch the movie. I tell them it takes less time than that to read a short story, if they're so concerned about time. They tell me they don't want to do that much work. One of them says that employers want obedient workers, not workers who can think for themselves. I know he's saying something true but that doesn't explain to me why they hate Arthur Miller. I want to say something about the universal human experience. I want to say something about their individual voices, about their inherent Buddhahood. I want to ask them, don't they want something more than going to work every day? Don't they want jobs where thinking is

encouraged? I want to ask them, don't they love anything, aren't they still children somewhere inside? Don't they want what is rightfully theirs as human beings? Don't they want to use all of their capacities to full capacity? But I look at their faces and the way they look at each other, vying for status and the shortest distance between two points—who can make the TA look dumb?—and I know it is too late and it was too late before they ever walked in the door, but I don't know why. I know the loud one just lost his job. I know half of them have sick kids at home. I know three of them read at a second-grade level. I know they think midgets are funny. I don't know why. “Here's your final,” I say. “No, you can't use the internet during the test.” The girl with the confederate flag belt buckle knocks the essay out of the park.

My Saturday night date, neither you nor the other Jack, insists on walking through downtown Tucson. He says it's because he's from Charleston and everybody walks there but only after he has a Hemingway and a highball and a vodka soda and a whiskey and some kind of Japanese melon liqueur do I realize it's just because he doesn't want to crash his Land Rover of a graduation present. He steals a flag off a construction sign and leaves it in one of my blue vases. He walks me back to my apartment and asks if he can come in. I say okay. I hate questions I can't say no to: Can I have a bite of that? Can I borrow your pen? Are you coming home for Christmas? I really have to pee. When I come back from the bathroom he's in my bed in his boxer briefs. I bet he doesn't skip that many steps on a term paper. What the fuck. This isn't Bull Durham. I let him kiss me badly for a while and then try to think of a shoehorn. He tries to shove my hand down his pants. No thanks, I say. I can't sleep with this erection, he says. That's not my problem, I say, and try to fall asleep. He asks me if I want

a boyfriend. Um, I say. I don't know. I do know. I do want a boyfriend. Just not him. He whispers he's going to leave and stands up and vomits all over the corner of my room. He runs into the stairwell and finishes vomiting there. He has fingerprint-shaped vomit marks all over his designer underwear. I start laughing and can't stop. "I'm glad you're not pissed," he says in between heaves. I don't know how to tell him it would be better if I were pissed; then I'd be taking him seriously.

The instructor I work for takes me out into the hallway. "My mommy's dying," she says. I tell her whatever she needs from me. On the drive home I think about a grown woman saying "Mommy." I remember my mother told me that on black box recordings the pilots beg for their mothers. That's sick, I said. I think it's sweet, my mother said.

On Halloween the poet dressed mostly as Jesus—discounting his poison-green, strategically ripped leggings—sits next to me at a bonfire and offers up to our makeshift altar his thoughts on responsibility. He says that a writer's natural distance from a subject is still a valid point of view; he says that inherent in talent is a responsibility to speak for those who can't, or don't. He says that it's not condescending to speak for others if you truly care. I light the end of my marshmallow stick and watch the way it illuminates the stones in a tiny red light. I tell Jesus that I've been hiding my love of words, keeping it in a box under my bed like a child with treasured marbles, but that suddenly, terrifyingly, I'm finding I've been remiss. He drinks his beer and says, "Well, you have to love it, but it also has to not matter." That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. The shaggy poet in lederhosen asks to borrow my marshmallow stick and crouches next to the fire, then jumps back. "How are you standing so

close?” he asks me. “It’s sweltering.” There is a scorch mark on my pants where an ember landed. “It’s cold out,” I say. In the morning when I wake up alone I smell like flames.

Last night I thought I saw you buying cigarettes at the corner store. My issue isn’t that lifetimes are entropic; it’s that memory accumulates. My joints creak.

My parents’ thirtieth anniversary falls on November 28th, exactly six months after my twenty-fifth birthday and your twenty-fourth, when Gemini is at ecliptic zenith, but by then they will have split up the furniture and taken up residency in two separate houses in my hometown.

The next morning Jack tells me about a dream he had during the night in which a midget tried to sell him a talking pony. “What color was it?” I ask. “It was black—very pretty,” he says. “So I talked to it for a while and I tried to figure out a way I could buy it and then I went back into my apartment where my friend was and I said, ‘I don’t even have enough time for you, how would I have time for a talking pony?’” I suspect I am the talking pony. I get up to brush my teeth and my uterus begins to bleed from a general lack of eggs. I think about *The Godfather*, about black ponies and blood, and I don’t laugh, even though it is funny.

For Ashley, November 2014

Do not open your door to love. Have crushes—that’s all right—and orgasms. Keep a vibrator by your bed. But do not forget your own face in favor of the sharp lines and shadows of another’s. If you do not sleep, make sure it’s because you are e-mailing your editors and meeting your college roommate for cocktails and not

because you have let the nighttime softness seep in under your windows to curl against your breast. Make sure you don't drink alone or stare up at desert stars. Dearest, you are still whole and wholly ignorant of spaces you cannot sate. You call me generous; I call myself cracked in the windpipe. A prison is not a prison until you've seen the sun. If it were mine to do again, I would take a chisel to my own eyes.

Since May 28th of this year, our only bond has been the funds from the plane ticket you didn't use that are still sitting in my inbox with your indelible name attached. I'm not dumb enough to think you will use them but hope is a thing with feathers that never shuts the fuck up or takes a lunch break. I don't know how real our bond actually is because it's just an electronic promise of electronic money, but then again I suppose light is as good a measure as any. I bought you the ticket for our birthday, but it's November now.

Peter calls me and I answer and he tells me that you are dead. I am many things, but not surprised. In the days before I call your mother to ask for the clock and hear the details, I do not pretend it was a car accident or untimely heart attack. You are my Gemini twin. I know what you did. Your mother gives the clock to someone else. Tick tock.

When I was seventeen I told my mother that I wanted to marry Bob Dylan. "Oh, honey," she said, "you are destined for misery." I like the over-handled flavor of irony, but to my mother it would probably just taste like blood.

I ask the guide if we can look at Mercury, but he says it's too close to the sun except at certain times, and that staring at the sun through a telescope is a good way to burn a hole through the back of your skull. The Romans believed that Mercury was actually two distinct stars, due to its different positions at dusk and dawn. The truth that the Romans were not told was that Mercury is a singular immortality, split between East and West in location and continually phasing like the moon, but in essence, one small, iron-laden, flame-scorched planet, transiting for the next five billion years in its egg-shaped orbit across a solitary star.

Of Oils

BY KERRY TRAUTMAN

1.
Mouse-girl in the back of the classroom
whose hairs conglomerated in striations,
enunciating the tufts'
growth patterns—like a field
of soil, freshly-tilled and
inoculated with rows of unseen seeds.

2.
Olives were plucked and pressed
to meld my panfull of
chopped onion and garlic,
translucening their cellulose
with celery, carrot in golden sluice,
as if the olives—
who could not avoid their own demise—
will accomplice
fellow vegetables' slow sweat.

3.
Iridescent swirls floating
on parking-lot puddles.
Retired from the work of slicking
cars' gears and ball bearings,
left now to drift and glimmer
momentarily—sinking back into black
asphalt nooks when the sun
completes its work of evaporation.

4.
My fingertips smell of tangerine peels,
the citrus oils dense as chrism,
blessing the nailbeds
with winter sweetness.
Perhaps the wisemen, instead of myrrh,
could have bestowed upon the babe
an ark of oranges.

5.
I rub mentholated ointment
on my son's chest—
like the hull of a ship-in-a-bottle.
The slickness smells blue as
peeks of January sky between
swells of snowcloud.
The iced-whiskey vapor will
expand alveoli, soothe mucosa,
bring sleep. It will.

6.

We revive February feet with
smeared petroleum
jelly at bedtime and
sheaths of serious wool socks.
The petrolatum knows
to be sucked by crusted whorls,
ooze into crevasses the way
snowmelt seeks the earth's core.

7.

It is both miracle and sin—
the cinnamon and butter in
frivolous veins
through the breadloaf,
preventing the dough from
adhering to itself,
refusing to be absorbed into the
dough,
maintaining sweet selfness,
like the best kind of wife.



KIM McANINCH

Funny The Things We Recall

BY JULIE STANDIG

My cousins, some red-faced cantor and a couple of Persian in-laws buried my aunt on Sunday. Lowered in the ground, next to my uncle, almost five years to the day he died. Her son covered her casket, one shovel of mustard-brown dirt at a time, making sure this woman who didn't believe, was buried the proper kosher way. He and the red-faced cantor took shovel after shovel after shovel until the dirt was gone. And when his sister's knees buckled he stopped, steadied her, then picked up the shovel to carry on.

It was nine degrees. I could no longer feel my toes, stood stiffly silent, watching them shovel and struggle. And then I was at the beach, Jones Beach. Four years old, sitting next to a red metal cooler with Coca-Cola written in thick white script. I wore a navy sweater (because my mother kept me in sweaters—no matter how hot), but my cousins were bare-chested and blonde with matching shovels and pails covered in beach balls, starfish and sand. Mustard-brown sand.

Polaroid

BY JULIE STANDIG

They posed in size order, barefoot by the bundt cake:
my family at Thanksgiving—not one smile in the room.
Two held dish towels, Leah's legs wrapped in bandages.

Floral print aprons, ivy, brick and striped walls—the bandages
the only solid in this high-ceilinged kitchen. A chocolate cake
displayed like a trophy on a glass pedestaled plate centered the room.

Union City, New Jersey, 1971: men smoking Chesterfields in the living room,
women drinking pina coladas from teacups. Even Leah's bandages
could not sway how they savored the rum, devoured the home-made cake.

Cake, cigarettes, pina coladas—in one room—their love bandaged and preserved.

Dear Citizens of the Hotel Conference Bar

BY STEVIE EDWARDS

I feel most sober when pressed
against a sticky backdrop of bar laughs
and clinked Proseccos.
At the conference bar I want
to be the question and the answer
to the prowl of scholars
who want to submit poems
or penises for my evaluation.
I want to spin into the too small clothes
of tequila shots. To lick the salt,
bite the lime like I am twenty-two
and in love with you,
you who are everyone and dancing
with lips brushing sweaty wisps
at the base of my neck,
you who are swirling salt
and spine, time and shoulder.
I throw sobriety down a flight of stairs
until she bruises, admits she's no god,
no good, just a sack of organs
quitting the earth a little less quickly.



Comfort

BY STEVIE EDWARDS



ASHLEY GARNER

Midnight at Lot 10 and I am trying
to prove I'm inside my body:
rhythm, a sign of life,
some sound, some bit of God guiding
limbs through the heavy clutter
of manhattans and the coldest February
I've walked into. I walk into
the center of this barroom,
and can't understand my shape,
a little thicker than I remember,
leaning on a man who looks like a man
I used to love in Chicago.
History says a woman is a woman
with her red heels clicking
around dance halls,
but I want to retire into flannel
and flats, to tuck history
into bed alone, to drown it
in orange juice and stars.
I want the comfort of my own body,
I declare to the empty street
as I stumble up porch steps,
search a big purse for keys,
with no man trailing behind.





JÖKULL HELGI SIGURÐSSON

Armada (*und Delirium beim Wal-Mart*)

BY JIM MEIROSE

Armada. Sailing in the ocean. Down is up and up is down. Armada sailing in the ocean.

After all—we afforded this damned Armada, didn't we? said the Man. Why can't we buy a few more things? Why can't we buy anything we damn well please? he added, as they bounced along the potholes..

Okay, okay, said the Woman, as she turned around and scanned the interior of the jouncing eight seat four door brand new huge vehicle; the Armada. Brett, Charlie, Corey and Brook were in the back bouncing with the bumps, each busy in his or her own way. The ride wasn't happening for them. They were each elsewhere; inside books and phones and games, in other spaces. A smile crossed the face of the Woman as she turned back around facing the road rushing at and under them and all the shapes and colors gliding by on either side.

What a fine family, she thought. The Man drove thinking nothing. The Woman had not been reminded as the two empty seats in the back had usually reminded her of Ainsley and Addison; the two stillborn; the two years back gone as each past moment's gone forever to be immediately replaced by new. They flowed on to the Wal-Mart. At last the man turned, the last green lit left turn, into the great lot, toward the huge name; Wal-Mart.

Okay, he said. Here we are.

The drive had been far and bumpy but well worth it, to actually be at the Wal-Mart. See, long ago in the dealership showroom the Man

and Woman had chosen the Armada because of the number of children they expected to have. The stillbirths had not yet happened. The pregnant woman had just had nissen surgery also, was in some pain, and the Man felt bad. So they went for something new; nissen suggested Nissan, and—this is how they ended up with the Armada. Eight seats, four doors. Family of eight. They were to have been a family of eight, before the stillbirths. So they ended up buying the fleet of warships; they bought the Long Beach Armada baseball team in Long Beach, California as well, but did not know. They did not know either of Armada, Michigan, a small village of 1730 people, which has a country fair each August. They had not been aware that there was actually, in Russia, a club for owners of Armadas like the one they just bought. They did not know that the Armada historically had brought owners back to the dealerships for repairs more often than any other car.

Why an Armada? the Man had asked the Woman.

The Woman looked into space surrounded by white; a man in white came.

You want surgery? this doctor man had asked the Woman another day.

I—I—I don't know—

Well—I can do that surgery. I'm good at it. I do it all the time.

Yes, she said, loosened by his tone. Yes, I need that surgery, she said; and as the Man pointed into the Armada in the showroom, it all happened. Look, he said—it has dual head restraint DVD monitors, said the Man, as it all happened. The kids will love that—

Yes I know.

They got out of the Armada and came under the sun. Their eldest, Corey, blurted as they went across the lot toward the door; shopping at Wal-Mart is always lots of fun! And right then, at right that time of day in 1568, Philip II of Spain sent the Armada against England. Who knew? Who knew how many would die? Who? Who's got the list? repeated the Man. The Woman at last produced it. Her finger went on the paper and she said The birdcage we need to buy, is first. The Man looked at her puzzled, saying But honey, it seems to me the primary unit is needed first. She looked at him as they wound their way over the scorching black-top across the lanes of diagonally parked cars, and she said Maybe that's true—but look here; the next item on the list is, my dress. I need a cheap dress; but, they did not know, as they neared the entrance to the Wal-Mart, that once an Armada had unexpectedly accelerated from 65 to 100 miles per hour, nearly killing the passengers. As they walked on toward that day the Man said to the Woman Let me see that list—I need a belt is a belt on the list? She nosed the list, found it, and said Yes; just as on another day at exactly the same time, a car salesman stated Listen, listen: I'll tell you why an Armada is best for you folks; but over the long ago words the Man said to the Woman I also need shoes. Philip II also wore shoes, as he said the words Build your Armada, sweet milady, that long ago long ago time—as Brett chimed from behind Hey, don't forget I need a magic wand—is a magic wand on that list too, Mother? The Woman turned, saying yes, it is—and then the Armada was defeated and nearly destroyed by storms off the Hebrides, as the next child Charlie said Are we going to buy me a blanket like we said? Mine smells all like dog, wet dog—remember I said. And the Woman said yes, do not worry. You do not hand out ass, remember? And we also need plastic flowers. And also

we need to know that someone else's Armada shut down without warning, but we cannot know and were not told, like Brook was telling, as they mounted the curb from the blacktop to the concrete, I need that vase we talked about too, remember? Is that vase on the list? insisted Brook And what else is there—what else is there but a menacing black Armada coming over the horizon? I need a hat, said the Man. See? See? It's on the list! Sensing the Man's excitement over the DVD equipped headrests, the car salesman said, Drive an Armada! Pillows are on here, said the Woman as the chrome trimmed doors came at them. We need pillows—fireships, hellburners; a rolling pin's here too! Who the hell, in this day and age, uses a rolling pin, was asked; the answer came from the oldest child, Corey—as it also was so that there is always the lemon law available, for bad customer service, as well, that is, if they have customer service at all, at all. For the Armada, or the Wal-Mart either. Baseball glove, blurted a child from behind they did not turn to—let's not forget that baseball glove; but they needed to watch the approaching curb. They conquered the curb and went in automatically and the chrome trimmed door closed behind them also automatically and they proceeded into the guts of the Wal-Mart where it got really cool.

Stillbirths.

Wal-Mart.

Stillbirths.

So, said big boss Ilene, entering blackhaired into the expensively paneled conference room. Now that you are all back from your big husky lunches and all of your small gossip, can we start to brainstorm on what

the name for next year's full size SUV will be? Massingill wants a recommendation by close of business today, so let's get cracking. Upstairs wants it, they get it; you know? Upstairs always gets what they want. So let's go.

She sat, and they sat, everybody sat and glanced at each other. Their fingers rested lightly on the high gloss conference table, at which it was said the great founder himself had sat way back then holding his last meeting; so they sat, surrounded by black framed photos of the late, great founder smiling, always smiling and shaking hands with every head of state in the world; Ilene, Charlie, Frieda, Dawn, and Carolyn had all looked at each of the photos long and hard and knew what the great founder would expect. They had been taught that if he were here, he would expect their full concentration; he would demand their full attention; yes, they knew that naming next year's great SUV was a heavy burden. But it was a burden they each had earned. A nameless small minion stood by the wall, next to a white board with a marker, waiting to write what would now flow from them as they gazed onto through and below the tabletop. The flow started coming and names blurted out in turn; and as they blurted, the minion deftly wrote on the board. The board began to fill as the names came at first slowly.

Authority, said Ilene. Let's start there. Imagine driving The Authority—or the Deckle—or play. What about the Play, there's a Golf, there's a Soul—what about Play—

Varsity, blurted Charlie—Varsity, or Fleet. Drive the Fleet. You know.

No, that's an enema, snapped Frieda. Where is your head? she sent into his glare.

Now now, said Ilene, head raising, eyes opening. No fighting, no—

ideas please. Ideas. Only ideas, nothing else—

Miracle, snapped Frieda—the Miracle, the Green Knight, the App—
App? Said Carolyn—my God, no, Frieda.

Children, children, please—

Ideas, please.

Showdown, said Frieda, slipping into a trance. Showdown, Pass-
word—Triple Play, Trifecta—

Dawn sat hands clasped eyes closed listening. It was coming they
could not know it, but it was coming, but—

Cannon, flowed from Ilene, and was written—Spotswood, Preston,
Remote, Icon.

There's already an Icon, said Charlie—

I think not, said Ilene.

Dawn told Ilene, You yourself said don't fight, boss—ideas you said.
Here's one—Extension!

No—Demander. Demander, or Network, or Canadian or Canadienne.
Charlie's finger raised and his eyes opened—yes, Canadian and Cana-
dienne—one for the gentlemen, one for the ladies. What an idea what an
idea—

Won't work, no, said Ilene. What wall's your head punched through?
That is so fifties, that thinking—so forties and fifties. Carolyn you—you're
thinking! What you thinking?

Analyst! Prizefighter! Champion! Hollywood—there, it's perfect!
Drive a Hollywood!

The great black and white photographed founder gazed down mind-
lessly. Charlie and Ilene's heads snapped to Carolyn, both speaking, con-
tinuing the flow filling the white board; the minion's marker flew flow-

ing—Millionaire, Punisher—there, very manly; Punisher!

God, no, where's your head? Trickster! Relentless, yes—drive a Nissan Relentless. There you go.

Or a Spiny, sighed Charlie. Little, bitty Spiny—

Giggles came lifting the heavy blanket over them smothering down the true ideas, which, now that they were well greased and hot, came ever faster.

Nissan Stranger. Nissan Bassmaster—

It was coming coming up in Dawn.

Roselli. President! Eiffel Tower!

It was coming coming like bile comes sometimes. Up, inside Dawn. Crusader. Daredevil—there it is drive the new Daredevil! That's it, that's it, we got it—

Hardpack, flowed from Charlie smothering Ilene—Hardpack, Hardwood—

We are getting nowhere—nowhere—we need a break let's break— It came out from Dawn then, smothering them down. As in it came from outer space, it came from Dawn. Out on the table it spelled out not on the white board but across the table like hot children's vomit in the overheated schoolroom.

Armada.

They stopped, half-up for the break, but the founder's thousand faces set them down.

That's it! Armada! I like it! I do—

Drive an Armada!

The Armada!

Nissan Armada!

It stained across the tabletop. It oozed down into the tabletop's tiny pores, indelible. It seemed that there were smiles on the founder around the walls that weren't there before. Ilene arose abruptly, pad in hand.

Armada it is. Dawn, thank you. God bless you Dawn—

Yes God bless—

Have a blessed day—

Armada.

Perfect. Just perfect.

Armadas would sell. Armadas would flood the roads; Ilene left and went to the boss.

The new Nissan Armada.

Perfect, said the boss after she told him. I can see it parked at the curb at summer picnics all across America—Nissan Armada. Trips to the shore, the mountains—yes.

Armada, repeated Massingill. Perfect.

Ilene.

Yes?

You and your crew have done it again; take the rest of the mother fucking Friday day off!

The moment hung already gone and an empty one came to be filled, and gone, and another and another and another and on—

The family whiskwhirled through the Wal-Mart. Their many orange plastic carts filled very quickly. They came together again to knock heads at the checkout. The bright clean checkout girl smiled them on in. Items came coming onto the belt. The check out girl began as usual, setting a

good example of a hard nameless worker who has a name tag that always is checked out but never ever again remembered. No, no—the Man insisted long ago moths ago—I want this Armada. For you. You want this Armada. The woman watched the first item check through. See what a birdcage costs. \$48.73 for a birdcage. The Armada long ago, but still there, just hidden as they loaded the belt, was composed of galleons, galleys, galleasses, carracks, and hulks. This dress cost eight dollars. Just eight. Fifty for a birdcage, eight for a dress. Cheap dress, yes, they knew that already—but more importantly they would find in the future that Armadas are prone to fires in the motors that ran to adjust the seats. Recall notice, would say the little slip fallen from the mailbox as the woman fumbled the sheaf. The man's belt costs twelve. Next year's Armada would not be downsized. That was the rumor from upstairs, but that was false. What was true is the shoes cost thirty dollars. Each ship in the Armada came equipped with a weathergage. The magic wand went up, moved, scanned, came down, came up \$14.15. More than the Woman's dress that will lie on Mother's back. Brett grabbed back the magic wand when it came up; hers. Hers. My magic wand, she said. She waved it just as the overhead console of a retired couple's Armada fell cleanly atop them in the Rockies. The green blanket cost \$16.96. Scan, scan, scan; in Australia though they would call it the Quashqoi. Important word in Australia, where the plastic flowers go for \$8.91. The Dutch flyboats could operate in the shallow water that the galleons, galleys, galleasses, carracks, and hulks could not. This was the turning point. Another reason that old Armada was defeated. But theirs was new. A new start for the Armada. The checkout girl screams inside, screams inside all day, but this vase is lovely she says—plus this vase is a steal at \$14.97. The woman smiled at the girl, who

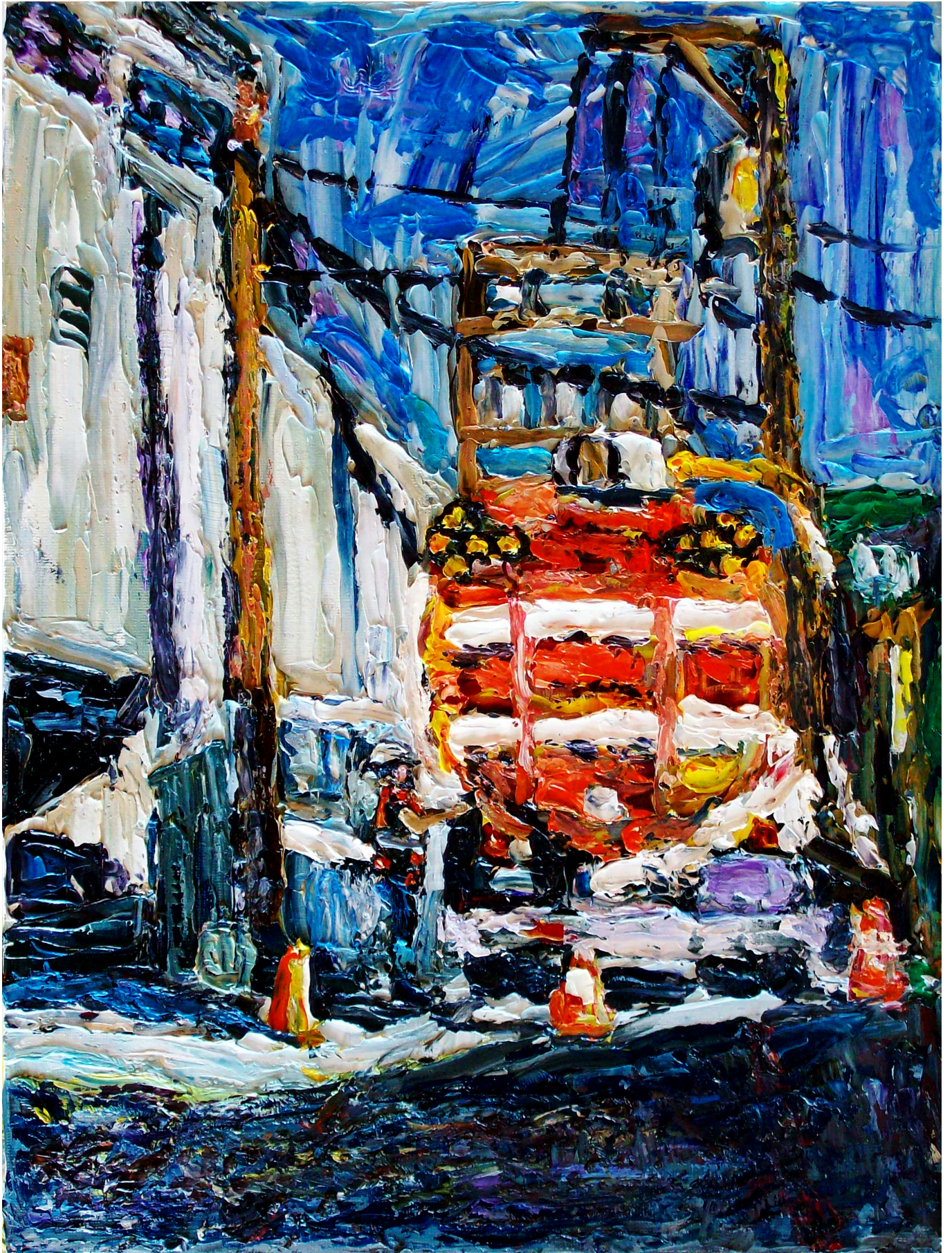
added a sale; big sale today. You are very very lucky, she screamed in her smile and was all done talking, as just then in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere, an Armada just like this family's would go headlight dark. Young couple driving in the dark with no lights? thought the trooper. Need to check that out. Son, I think you've got no lights. Do you think that you've got lights? The hat went for \$9.80. Yeah there's no lights, so here, here—follow my car to a place of safety. It's too dark up here in the woods to drive alone with no lights. The trooper's blue shirt had sharp wrinkles arrayed all across every part of it. In the stage presentation at the great yearly sales meeting, the founder's successor said yes, Armada's name plays off the aggressive nature of SUVs, and often of their drivers. But I support it because it's a real word. It beats the heck out of PA560 or the like. This pillow for just \$5.99? blurted Father. Wow, wow. They all laughed at his wow. Spanish Pataches fled into the teeth of the storm. The founder's successor went on, waving the family's new-bought rolling pin at the audience and stated firmly Armada, Armada—you will sell many Armadas this year. As sure as this rolling pin costs \$12.46, dark smoke will roll from under the hood of many an Armada way down the road. But that's way down the road, so just sell them now. What's important is now. The only time is now. But—this fucking baseball glove costs a mere \$9.99? That's a lucky number, kids. Look at the lucky number. The trooper led them forty miles to a dealer, where they would wait bored until daybreak, when there will still be two hours before the service department opens, but at least they were safe when the total rang up; Woman, Man, Brett, Charlie, Corey, Brook; plus the two angelic stillborns with names she was forgetting a little with each passing day—Ainsley and Addison, Addison and Ainsley—the total rang up to

\$191.58. This is Wal-Mart; the place with the bright lights; the tax came out as \$8.61. The grand total already; what's the bottom line already? Get to the fucking point. The bottom line. The bedrock. Oh. \$200.19. Please pass the Mastercard, asked the man mildly of the Woman behind. \$200.19. I left my wallet home, he said palm out. The Woman said you dolt! But I still love you, yes; so lovingly the card passed to him, and from him to the girl, and from her it was swiped, and they all thus were proven to be the same species, okay, so it got approved. Sign here sir. As the Man signed nameless hands of tinier ones than the girl deftly bagged the items. But Brett would carry her magic wand out, she said. Give me my magic wand! She waved her magic wand. The founder and stillborns smiled down from above. The cart began going, as thank you, they said to the now all done not busy checkout girl and the faceless baggers. They followed the cart in a line beneath the neons. Wal-Mart carts know where to go, what do, after \$200.19 gracefully changes hands. I bet you think I'm nuts you know, played inside the walking Man. Just crossed over, you know. Just crossed over. The exit doors said the word in round red. In the Armada coming here the news voice had said beware of juice boxes. You know, those treats you often give the little ones? They are mostly after one or two weeks on the supermarket shelves lined with a growth of unseen scum. Know you have been drinking unseen scum. Do not buy juice boxes any more. Plus—Roselli? Did you actually say Roselli? What kind of name for an SUV is that, Roselli? It's a ballplayers name, came from the air. Just came out pop, just like that. This is brainstorming after all you know. You said that Ilene. Roselli's nothing. Just ballplayer. No biggie, let's move on; and upon the family's entering the bright summer sun outside the Wal-Mart, the heat rose from the asphalt to choke them up smothering. The heat

rose from the asphalt in great empty waves. Need to get to the Armada. At the Armada we will be safe, they thought in unison, feet burnt nearly the ground.

Safe they rolled the streets in the air conditioned shiny brand-new Armada. From the dealer proud that day they'd come, waved off by the smiling car salesman; and today, in that same Armada still good as new, Wal-Mart receding, they breathed with cooling burnt up feetsoles. Talking laughing and giggling brought them home to forget until the fat credit card bill came. The deer sized dog they rescued last year greeted them, had not pooped in the house while alone as they had shopped, and knew nothing of money, let alone the specific amount of money \$200.19. The dog's tail beat at the stillborns only the dog could still see. Ainsley and Addison, those. Those there. Beat them until they are gone. Beat them and beat them for the poor Woman. Armada usually refers to a group of large moving things. What did we spend \$200.19 on this month, the Woman griping the Mastercard bill asked the Man as the kids played their grabass games outside. Thankfully, the stillborns went out with the children. Corey would come in later having jammed a thumb but that was later not now. The woman saw clearly the \$200.19, all free of the depression and worry that had sucked off into the mouth of the Man who remembered the day at the Wal-Mart. There, drowning deaths awaited them. Justinus would drown. Oh, had said the man—that was the trip to Wal-Mart. That sentence from the man was all it had taken to cure her. She stood wearing the dirt-cheap dress they had bought that day much like the dirt-cheap dress on the woman in the Armada following the state trooper to the deal-

er again and again and again. Oh, yes, Wal-Mart, she said, as the son of the founder spoke on, and outside Brett's magic wand waved right through the floating unseen stillborns. Armada's a fitting name, he told the sales force, because pretty much every aspect of this beast is size L or XL. In the mild laughter, it got decided elsewhere that the Armada wanted to fight on boarding, rather than use cannon. Fighting, man to man, the Spanish way. Laughter erupted at the beloved leader's joke. He added, and this—this is not just the size of a ship; it's the size of a whole fleet! Colossus! Well, said the Woman, turning from the auditorium, cutting off all the corporate frivolity—I guess we don't spend that much every month—I mean as long as we don't—you know what I mean. Shot lockers and the anchors they had abandoned getting away impeded them. Sure I know, said the Man. But if we need the stuff, we buy it. Thank God for Wal-Mart, or it could have been worse; it could still be back in 1588; back in the little ice age. The woman said I feel better now—you always make me feel better. The man smiled, the children could be heard outside, the horrors of Ireland for the Armada were long gone and over. Thank God for Wal-Mart, for the children, and the fading of the stillborns. Ainsley and Addison, Addison and Ainsley. On that day long ago they thought there would be eight. On that day long ago, there had also been drowning, starvation, and slaughter; but; it's all over. All over. Now.



ALLEN FORREST

Resolute

after Jack Gilbert

BY RALPH CULVER

The towering sun. Screaming whiteness high above the sea.
The light-stropped waves along Long Island Sound, curved blades
ranked and relentlessly advancing. That whiteness. The gesso
Alex layered across another canvas, one she had stretched
some nights before. How her eyes ground shut and teeth gritted
when I moved inside her, as if she were dragging a great weight.
Three of us, living in rooms barely adequate for one.
Not that the baby and I will be there much longer. Thinking
of my vast hunger set loose by the smell of boiled eggs
that slid across the Parkway East as I rode beside my father
driving into Pittsburgh. Flame-tipped stacks of the J&L mills
decanting smoke, sulfur pouring into the Ford through
the open windows. Just fourteen, famished, wondering what
would become of us, certain I heard the clink of empties
jostling in a case of beer in the trunk behind the back seat.
Praying the university might let him keep his job. Or not.
If we open ourselves to quintessence rather than particulars
We gain clarity, the way a bee does not recall a flower
but does its purposeful gavotte to point the way
to an abundance. Spinning under the blows of the sun,
helpless, the dazzling white sands ablaze beneath my feet.
This helplessness that will set me to flight again
already beginning to resolve in me as anticipation.
Pleasurable expectancy. A kind of contentment.

Last Call

BY RALPH CULVER

What the mind fashions, what the mind does not,
she says, but no way I'm being sucked into that dialectic.
A freezing wind follows someone through the door
and claws its way up the inside of my pant legs,
finishing the job that her voice had begun an hour before
of dismantling my sense of ease and rightness in the evening.
The bar is half empty. This was long enough ago
that you could still smoke while sitting at your table,
and I light one as she slowly drains another shot of ouzo,
the achingly deliberate rolling of her wrist, then
the equally precise wiping of the back of the other wrist
across her mouth. In fact, this was long enough ago
that I had already "stopped drinking"—or rather,
that drinking had clubbed me into abstinence—
and I suddenly, vividly recall a night in the same bar,
a more distant time and woman sitting there
across from me, when in disgust I had watched myself
strain to complete a sentence with a full ten seconds
plodding by between each sodden word I spoke.
She beckons to the waitress, coral smeared
across her knuckles. *And now, she says, the mind
fashions that you will drive me home,
and the mind does not fashion that you will sleep with me.*
If this be youth with its glory passing into shade,
I think, give thanks, its dissolution overdue.
She reaches for my cigarette and knocks
the empty shot glass over.

Glassblower

BY RALPH CULVER

Like that other god who breathed life into fire and molten dust, she rests.

It is good to stand here, thinking of nothing, to be still under the caress of the world's essential sensuousness.

Her face, neck, and back damp with sweat. Sipping water from a white china mug.

Her face and neck damp from squarely confronting the furnace.

Turned now toward the heavy steel grid of the old factory windows vented at an angle, staring out at the falling snow. The firelight behind her touching off sparks of lavender and indigo across the coursing snowflakes.

Lavender and indigo glistening at the nape of her neck, she drinks.

Breathing deeply and slowly in the ravishment of the chill, glittering snow before her and the heat of the furnace pressing at her back.

She sets her empty cup down on a cluttered table, and returns to the making.

Tableau

BY RALPH CULVER

Sitting at his desk, a man stares at a sheet of paper rolled into a typewriter. A few words are there, nothing substantial.

Across the room, a boy lies on his stomach on the floor, head propped up on his left hand, drawing in a sketchbook with his right—so far, only a line or two, just a suggestion of a shape.

And the third figure in the room, whose very form is nascent, untroubled by detail—nearly transparent, really? Although the man and the boy sense a presence, acknowledge it, they pay it no mind, confident as they are, as you are reading this, as I am writing it, that now is not the time the figure congeals, casting a shadow at last, and rises to take his measure.

The Bride of Penn Avenue

BY ZIGGY EDWARDS

On her porch it's always daylight, it's always
a steel town, girls always wear white that one day,
she's always awaiting the first glimpse of night.
In ensuing minutes never to happen
he will suffuse the bricks, descend upon
his bride. Except she never faced street and sky;
the memory is wrong. Approaching the door,
her draped knee bent on the next step. The bride
has a creator and doesn't know, doesn't know
she was painted or that she who painted has
died in a plane crash. She fades in the sun's harsh
remote brilliance and disappears when the rock
beneath her turns away. It has been so long
since I drove past, or not so long and I saw
myself projected on that wall. Not waiting—
she is entering her house for the first time.



Gold Shoes

BY LEANNE GRABEL



FELICITY JONES

It was a dream. Of course I'll keep it brief. I was sleeping on the rollaway. Assisted living. Visiting my mother. You came to visit. We were naked. In the rollaway. Rolling. After years of unspoken desire. I thought. At least for me. I was wrong. Wrong. I knew that. It was a dream. Well. You hugged me. From behind. Around the breasts. I liked that. In the dream. You could tell. I liked that. My face! O. Anyone could tell. I was naked with you. Not embarrassed. Not feeling fat. A bit embarrassed by my feet. Like rutabagas. Fists of gingerroot. But there was your daughter. The eldest. She liked me. I liked her. She was leading a workshop. Iroquois beading. She wore gorgeous gold shoes. I loved them. I needed those shoes. (To hide the rutabagas). I kept asking for the shoes. It was obnoxious.

You left.

V's Mortar Story and The Happy Insistence of Time

BY TJ REYNOLDS

3:15 PM – Ft. Lewis, Washington

I'm standing in a group of men in a parking lot behind our barracks. We kick at the blue gravel with our feet, hoping chips of this moment will break free, scatter, become less brilliant. We are here to speak with V after losing him as platoon sergeant so many months ago. We force our eyes to watch as he lifts his pant leg and shows us the metal articulations of his loss.

Our mouths fill with oil as we smile and laugh loud enough to make the nearest trees tremble and close their eyes.

4:05 PM – Between Kuwait Airport and Thule Air Force Base, Greenland

Sixty or so men fly home in a Freedom Bird. The plane seems borrowed from the '80s – blue upholstery tacked with orange and red chevrons. The flight attendants' faces seem faded, matching our clothes and faces after a year of sun.

The building torrent in our bellies and limbs still feels normal for us. We can't wait to apply it to the yielding flesh of civilians. We dream of stacking and clearing parties a room at a time, detaining women with our reckless charm, shooting down their boyfriends with empty beer bottles and belt-wrapped fists.

A thing is easier learned than unlearned.

And we are good at waiting by now, so we numb ourselves with food and an unbroken string of fancy – the substances and lovers that

might numb us back in the States. We sleep in the aisles and under seats just to wake and sleep again. Most of us still can't see how we've changed.

We fly economy.

The cabin filling with a sepia fog that nobody seems to notice.

2:52 PM – In transit between COP Tampa and FOB Marez

The Stryker shakes and swerves around us, and I clutch his hand more than he does mine. I hear myself making jokes and I smack his cheek once when his eyes roll shut. I tell him things from my life that he does not need to know.

I am stunned to silence, twice, by the beauty quickening in his blue eyes.

Halfway to the FOB, V interrupts me by reaching down, his hand deft despite its morphine. His whole body sighs relief when he feels his penis and testicles still his own.

2:40 PM – FOB Marez, inside cement wall

V wakes screaming, morphine, he wants some fucking morphine, and Doc's hand finds a needle and a thigh; so finally, V shuts up. He laughs in front of us. A tear rolls down his cheek as he rubs Doc's back.

His quiet smile after shocks me the most.

2:38 PM – FOB Marez, inside cement wall

We bring V in on a stretcher and for the first time Doc is frightened of his job. Someone cuts away a pant leg, another holds V's head. I keep watching as Doc's fear splits the tourniquet and someone has to run to get another. I think someone apologizes for pinning the wound shut again

and poor V drops into the fog.

2:34 PM – FOB Marez, outside cement wall

A song of boots moving, orders made, a staccato reminder of who we are. Ralston will take 2 to the roof to pull security; Seaman will freeze and leave the radio to Haney and the PL. I am grabbed by the shoulder and am running out of the police station's concrete embrace. We grab a stretcher and find a man writhing on the ground between two of our Strykers. He is no longer in charge of anyone. He is meditating on the sound of his own teeth grinding. We pick him up and he howls as his chewed left leg bends at the shin.

2:30 PM – FOB Marez, inside cement wall

Just as some of us are breathing again, a wailing, a keening like a wind tearing at wire. Someone's down, someone screams, It's V! It's Sgt. V! V is down! and we all find we still have feet and weapons, our bodies operating on their own as our minds score deep the outlines and colors of the things around us.

2:22 PM – FOB Marez, sleeping quarters

I pour coffee into a foam cup. I stir in Coffee Mate and sugar with a red straw. I won't be able to taste it for at least two minutes.

I dip my head to smell the caramel and brass warming my hand then walk back into the sleeping room. It's twelve by twelve and sleeps six for now. I try to pretend that I don't know men died here. I will not see the sooted walls as I walk to the soldiers near the door, some listening some talking. One man won't discuss anything but females while another uses

his two strongest fingers to knife a private's bird chest, smiling like a carnivore, calling him, "bitch... bitch... bitch..."



LEVI COLTON

Still Life

BY SCOTT WORDSMAN

Your prints in high school watercolor class were admired by few and some even told you—you who had spent too many hours with clenched hands and closed ears—they were lacking. Today you have taken on the title of administrative assistant. On gold pads of paper you find you can't trace your boss's red engorged mouth in the grotesque way you picture it contorting around your paintbrush-turned-shank in daydream death-sequences. Sometimes you nod off after lunch.

When you visit your graying parents each weekend you notice how their small kitchen walls still bear the scars of your creative collapse, prints you begat out of panic and sweat: that time your dog was slugged by a car; the boy who told you it was all just a gag. Your best piece received a B-minus in studio art, but before you brought it home, a friend with a steadier hand, as per your demand, transformed that dash into a plus with weapon of choice—a thin black pen. It sits on the mantle, doesn't say much.

Driving home each night is a study
in humility: As the road grows dark,
you recede in your seat till ensnared
in your hair, you are no longer there.
At times you think how simple
it would be to veer off course and
propel yourself north, toward
the grill of a Mack; you think that art
is kind of like that—(you think that
art is something you lack)—collapse,
capitulation, a white flag waving
from your neck as you rush full-tilt
home to your palace of shrugs, bolting
each lock twice before you fall asleep;
rejecting mirrors, embracing defeat.

Stories We Don't Tell

BY VIDUSHI CHAUDHRY

Even now, in my childhood home in Delhi,
lies an old sofa, striped and worn
thin on the end where my legs rested.
A brown Maruti splutters
but moves not an inch.
A study bursting with books,
some his, some hers, most
unripe and unread.

Mama's fingers caress
my hair as I lay on her lap, she smells
like strawberry lotion and buttery
bhuttas. I hear Dad, against
the noise of the TV, whooshing
breath as he follows Baba
Ramdev in Kapal Bharti
pranayama.





DENNIS ROTH

At fifteen, I stood on my balcony,
three stories up, among
Mama's potted ferns, watching
milkmen, vegetable vendors,
junk collectors and her male
friends.

Wishing
wishing
my parents had for each other
velvet words, soft eyes, bedsheets
with legs tangled over.

But rivers eroded mountain sides,
husbands doused wives in kerosene,
careless drivers mowed down mongrels
on the Defence Colony flyover,
and little boys stayed
common as a cussword
as they yanked their sister's dark hair.

Spirit Lodge, Saturday Night

BY KRISTOFER COLLINS

When in doubt return to what you know best
the gorgeous dark eight steps down
and the violent gaze of an archangel

this warm lacuna dim with blurry voices
and the boys in the back baking up pizzas
flour dandering their beautiful beards

the corner vending machine advertising smoke
and coke
and the cool contours of a cherry red chopper
announce themselves like the last band to ever
play Woodstock

like the advent of winter's first freeze
the streets of Lawrenceville are glazed sweet with
the stuff
and old Allegheny Cemetery keeps her secrets
stone-still

under the sagging cloth of early January
you say you could drink the bottom out of this
town
and still have room for one swallow more

more of this black beer beading the glowing bud
of your lips
more of this swirling organ aching as a broken
femur

more of this dance floor dotted and luminous as a million freshly-minted pennies

the Spirit Lodge on a spectrally quiet Saturday night grants shelter to all the spooky shit that goes bump in our brains holds its arms wide in welcome to the demons of our damned foolish decisions

we share so much and say so little sequestered here the new year creeping across Butler Street calling our names and pointing to the clock



ANNA LISA SCHNEIDER

Celica

BY KRISTOFER COLLINS

My parents' Toyota Celica flecked blue and silver in late summer
sedentary in the supine afternoons as my father slept

the white vinyl of the passenger seat sporting a shiner
the tiny black-eye of a cigarette burn

and the backseat sterling for a boy stretching out
sinking in waves of stereo noise

suburbs bending like guitar strings in the unwashed windows
tracing beads of light in the dust motes shuddering

across my drumsticking fingers
streetlamps throwing strange shadows every-which-way

and the shredding keening knowing shatter
scratching its way through the tiny speakers

all those songs my stunted inheritance
as much as bad teeth and nearsightedness

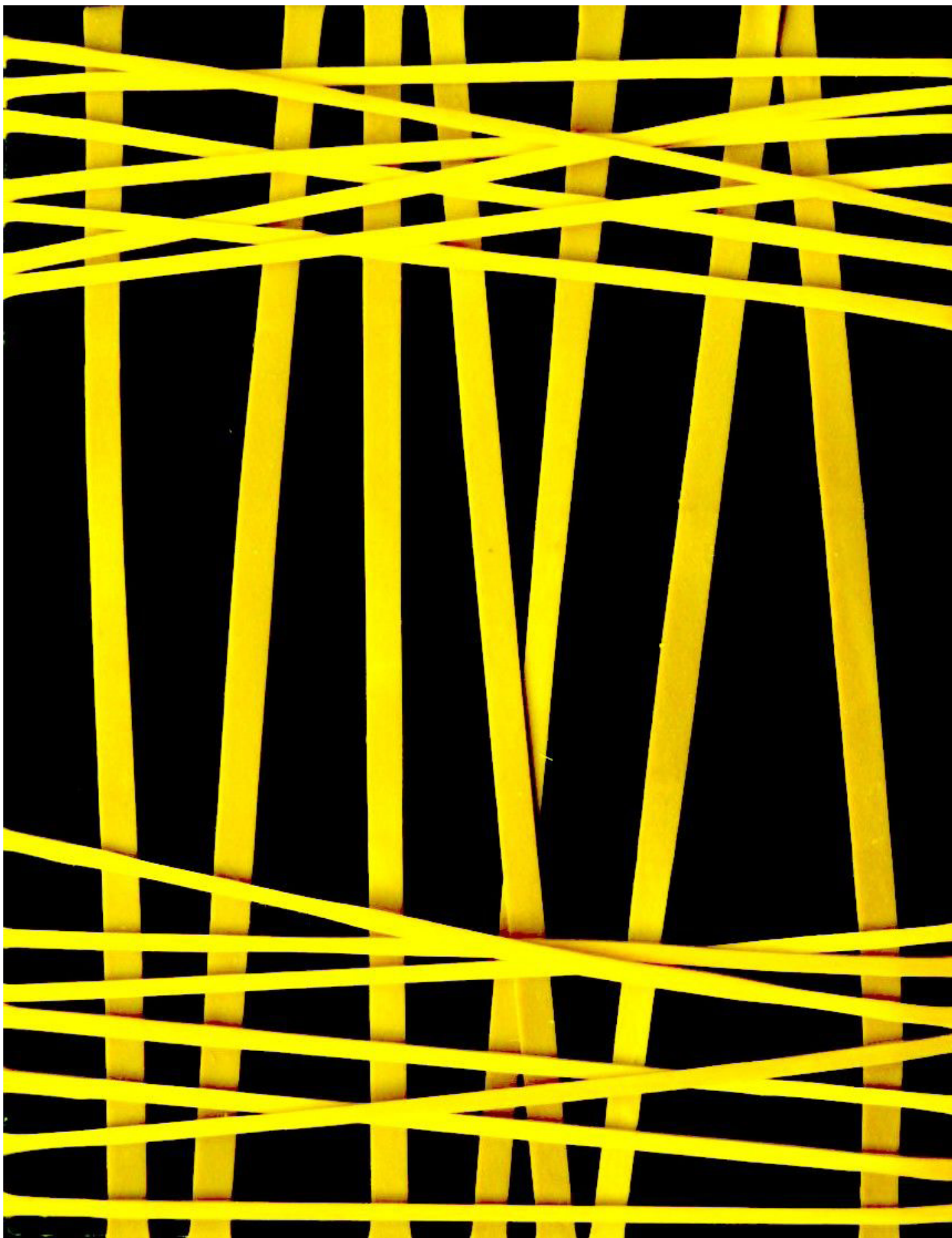
something like my father's voice swampy with cigarette smoke
a vanishing thing signaling from some lost certainty

the sort of single-mindedness suffered by children
so longed for now behind all these surrendered years

Listening to Neil Young with Ed Steck

BY KRISTOFER COLLINS

I agreed to meet Ed in Oakland to talk poems or work or whatever nonsense we could gather up between us and let sift from these indigent hands of ours into the thick summer weekend but instead I walked the mile or more to a bar on Liberty and waited, my sopping head and underarms happy for the air conditioning and when Ed spilled in it was quickly decided we'd pool our money and fill the jukebox solely with Neil Young and so spend our paychecks and the rest of the day drinking beer from big pitchers and enjoying the music and the consternation of the gathered grubby patrons as not one nor two but an endless carousing chorus upon chorus of that Canadian warbler descended like a winter's front snowing beautiful coke-fueled bilge all over the barroom blocking out the sun with Bruce Berry and danger birds and Brando but finally Ed could not resist the challenge inherent in ascending Sugar Mountain over and over piling remembered pain one pebble at a time into a brave alp we could only meet with our own streaming tears openly weeping and not nearly drunk enough to explain it away expecting nothing more than for each of us to step from the peak and plummet or soar as we so needed



FABIO SASSI

Elvis

for Rich Gegick

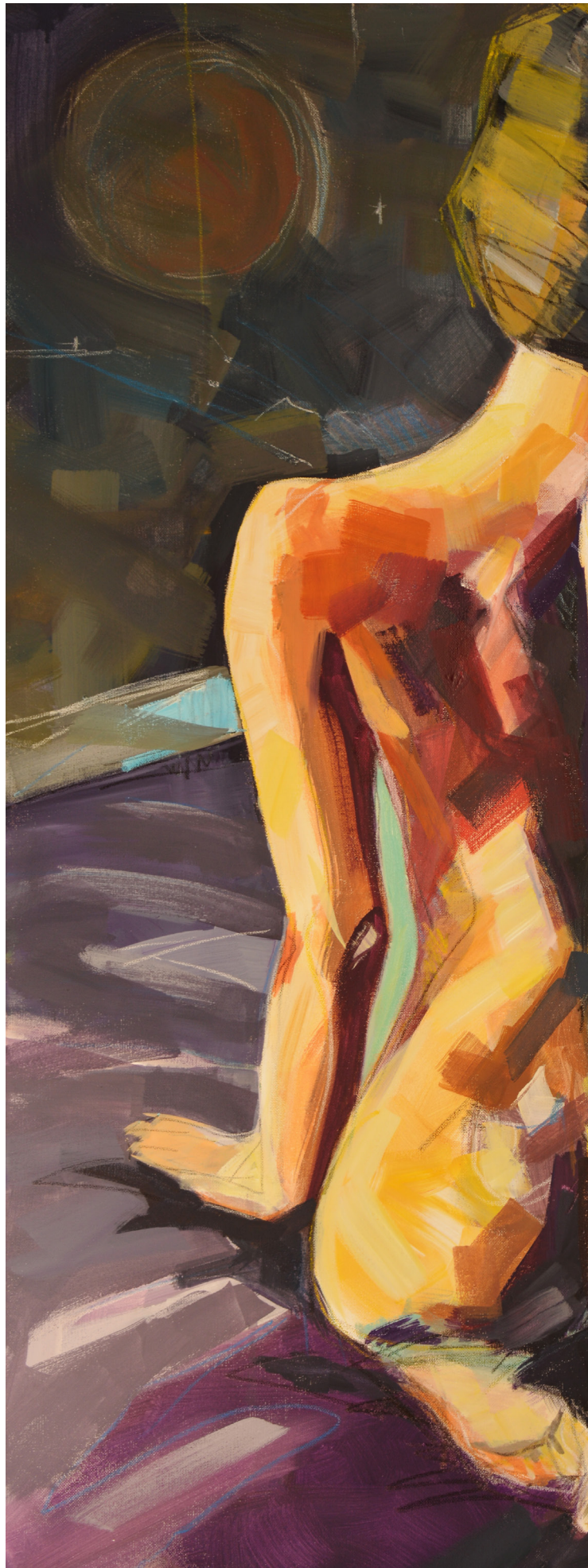
BY KRISTOFER COLLINS

I knew him the same as you the same as I know this ash-toppled table
and the thick whorls of lacquer we skate cans of beer across like a Minnesota lake
the air like something you could take a pick-axe to, his voice in our ears
sharp as that axe and big as our futures once must have looked to somebody

and you say it wasn't what he sang but in the end what that voice desperately reached for
sometimes only as persuasive as smoke but every so often impudent, expectant and
worried as a new father, sonorous as seabirds feeding in the richly purpled sunset

out there in the cresting whitecaps the incessant crashing is god at his most articulate
and here we can hardly be bothered to listen, but some nights I press my ear to the wall
and there is such a gorgeous rumble coming from the other side my eyes go damp
I know that sound of outstretched hands beseeching, the sound of men delirious for love

it's the same as a southern boy grown well beyond the bounds of his own flesh
all sense of self sweating out of him evaporating in the hideous stage lights
but for one tender moment of discovery in the face of oblivion that tells us it's okay





KIM MCANINCH

Second Glance

BY NELS HANSON

Does multiplying accident tend
at last unlikely, chance turn fate
quick as dinosaurs' stampeding
bones to fossils? I know smart
adults comprehend our life was
always meaningless and all will
fail but is there time for second
glances before a final goodbye?
Twice observe sapphire Alaskan
glacier touch the warmer ocean,
wander Carlsbad Cavern in New
Mexico where stalagmites taller
than Greek columns rise an inch
an eon, watch by Grand Canyon
rim the ancient riverbed survey
ten blues at sunset, far and near
mix up, more hypnotic than any
print by Escher. Drive Salmon
River when red sandstone walls
guard trout pools still at evening.
This present becoming past now

always was as it has to be. Most planets are too cold, others hot or wrong, the three bears' beds, bowls a greedy blonde girl tried rifling grizzlies' unlocked house. Did you know no one could live except for Jupiter's kind mercy, huge magnet of our solar system arranging meteors in darker rings than Saturn has to catch strayed asteroids bound to pelt this Earth to dusty craters? An odd anomaly sometimes recalls forsaken gods and lucky few turn fortunate, half tempted to praise an old apparent randomness that built our world so carefully: spar plumb, strands of rigging intricate, tiller, crow's nest braided willow, brass work, nine white sails belled by a silent westerly, all precise as schooners etched against full yellow moons and carving several wakes of V's for absent more distant satellites.

Black Hole

BY JIADAI LIN

I stepped off the train and saw a guy in a neon blue tank top leaning against a white convertible. The first thing I thought was, he's so skinny. He saw me too and smiled. It was as if the old Stephen had shed his skin, revealing a scrappier, pointier version of himself. Even his smile was sharper than before. The neckline of his tank top dipped in two severe straps. Up close, I could see the scars – two smooth etchings like tiny tracks at the bottom of his ribcage.

We hugged. His hair was past his ears now and unbrushed, a frayed brown. It was slightly frizzy from the dew that had fallen with the night and the ocean water in the air. He never had long hair before. He was the kind with the crew cut and polo shirts, never quite popped collars but close enough. Now his beach shorts practically slid down his hips. He wore flip flops and carried a wallet of folded cardboard in his pocket. He had dirt underneath his fingernails, from what I didn't know. He worked in an office again, I thought. He had explained it to me once. He worked for a company that sold logs of wood to bigger companies. His job was to direct people to move these wooden logs from here to there, from the bottom shelf to the top and back.

A while back he used to have a real office job, the kind he had to wear a suit for. He worked in a shiny Manhattan building made of mirrors and built like a giant icicle swelling from the ground. I had joked that those buildings were like black holes. Everything inside gone. Everything outside deflected.

“Interesting analogy,” he had said.

I didn't really know what a black hole was then, but I know now.

The last time I had seen him was four years ago, when I was still in law school and he was working for some financial consulting company traveling across the country to cities like Oakland and Tulsa and Tallahassee. The job paid well, but he hated it. I had scolded him at the time. Just be thankful you have a job. That's what I had thought.

The next year, when I started my own black-hole mirror-building office job, I got it more than anyone. They say money can't buy happiness. I'm not so quick to decide if it's true.

Money didn't bring me happiness, but it didn't bring me unhappiness either. I wasn't happy, but the linen tabletop steak dinners, black cars and designer umbrellas still made me happier than I would have been without them. In the end, I wasn't sure the two are that related at all. I had thought about it for a long time and came up with a theory that the correct correlation is not between happiness and money, but happiness and love. It's not about buying; it's about having. Having love – for people or pets or places or things, and getting to feel that love often. Both rich people and poor people can have love, I had noticed.

I told Stephen this theory on happiness as we drove out of the train station. I heard myself rambling, the one thing that I've come to hate in others.

“So it's not about buying. It's about having. Interesting,” he said, “How do I have?”

I had wondered about this too. “I don't know.”

It was just before midnight, but everything was closed. Apparently no city in the world is like New York City. We drove through the downtown area looking for a place to eat. The street was lined with small-town shops – sandwich shops, pet shops, stationary shops, muffin shops, coffee shops.

They would all come alive in the morning but now they were dark and locked up. A glittery banner hanging over the end of the street read, “Asbury Park Welcomes You.”

A day ago, I had packed up my office in midtown Manhattan. I had worked for three years at the Firm and had just established sufficient seniority to occupy my own office. A corner office it was not, but it was mine nonetheless. Just a little square of commercial rental space enough to fit a desk and a drawer of shoes. I had tacked all the requisite trimmings on the wall – my college and law school diplomas framed in bronze-embroidered paper, a wall scroll that announced in Latin that I was a fit member of the New York State Bar. How I had toiled for that status.

It really was a shame that I couldn't stay at the Firm longer, but I just couldn't.

I didn't give my two weeks' notice. I didn't even give a day's. It was reckless. I said “I quit” at 7 pm and was packing ten minutes later. There wasn't much of a conversation. It was a Tuesday. One of the most unassuming days of the week, I thought, and felt a sly satisfaction from the fact that I had sort-of ambushed them. Who would they use for the rest of the week for their menial tasks?

The next morning, I woke at 8 am. My body nastily rejected any more sleep. I sat on my couch holding a mug of dense coffee and sent out an email to the people in my life who I considered friends. Or friendly acquaintances. I cried as I typed and felt like an awful cliché.

The email was simple, surprising. It left much to the imagination. It also left a lot of room for rejection. Just: Hi Friends – I have quit my job and am in search of something better. It's been forever since we've talked,

but please let me know if you're still around and where you are. I'd love to catch up and maybe bum a couch for a night or two :) Regards, Mavis.

It was a good email because it didn't drag on and on. But I had used an emoticon. So it all evened out, I suppose.

Two girls from college responded immediately. One was living in Chicago, the other just outside Boston. One was in a serious relationship, the other engaged. They were cautious, polite, offering addresses and schedules, but also careful not to ask too much. I bet they were wondering, what the heck happened to Mavis? She hasn't already seduced the boss and is living in a sunny penthouse brownstone in Park Slope?

And then Stephen responded. Stephen, the loyal, friendly, aloof wanderer. I was shocked when his name appeared in my inbox. I was relieved too, because inside I knew that if anybody could give me some good advice, some true unexpected wisdom, it was Stephen. I was also just curious about what he was up to, about how he chose to live his life. If somebody like Stephen was also living a buttoned-up life, maybe I would feel better about mine.

We first met years ago, in a dark room – the lounge of our college dormitory, but it's not what you think. The motion-sensor lights were broken that day, and I sat on the squeaky plastic couch watching television. A cooking show. I was in the middle of a phase during which I watched exclusively cooking shows.

That day, I was watching a Paula Deen rerun. I wore heavy sweatpants and slip-on shoes with furry edges that resembled Eskimo footwear. About three-quarters into the show, Stephen wandered in, pulled up a chair, looked at me, and said, "Cooking, huh?"

“Yep. Cooking,” I responded, not taking my eyes off of the screen. I was vaguely aware that he was a transfer student and two years older than me. I had seen him in the hallways, his tidy brown hair pressed under a Boston Red Sox baseball cap.

On TV, Paula was whipping up a white froth and posing to drop it over a giant lemon tart. She licked her thumb and forefinger with a flourish.

Yumm, folks.

I heard Stephen lean back in his seat.

“Well,” he said, “Isn’t that something?”

I nodded.

He turned to me. “Hey, I’m Stephen.”

“Mavis.” I shook his hand.

“You live on this floor,” he said. It wasn’t a question. “I’ve seen you around. I live down the hall, just moved in here, actually.”

“Cool. Where from?”

“I transferred from Trinity. It’s a school in Connecticut.”

“I know what it is.”

He leaned in and whispered, “So, what’s up with the kids here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nobody makes eye contact. What’s up with that? I said hi to a girl the other day and she ran away hiding.”

“This is not where the cool kids hang. It’s the quiet, nerdy dorm.”

“So why are you here?”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t look like a nerd.”

“I got a lucky number in the housing lottery last year. This was the one building where I could get my own room. I like my privacy. Also, I

am a nerd.”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“You don’t even know me.”

“Do you like to study?”

I paused. “Yeah, I do actually.”

He sat back and looked off into the distance, somewhere beyond the room we were in. The corners of his eyes got squinty. I could see him as an older man, sitting on his wraparound porch with a whiskey and cigarette watching a thunderstorm, squinting like that.

Stephen then explained that he had started the semester late because he had a rare health condition which basically sounded like his ribcage never grew to be big enough for his lungs. Half a year ago he had gone to the doctor for a normal checkup and suddenly he was seeing specialists here and there for his condition. He had no symptoms, but he would have died. He went to a special clinic in North Carolina where the doctors inserted metal bars underneath his ribcage and forcibly fractured his sternum, and then expanded his ribcage over the course of months, like slowly inflating a balloon with sand. Or cracking open a metal egg from the inside.

“It was kind of awesome,” he grinned.

“But didn’t it hurt?”

“Yea, but you forget those things,” he said.

I looked at my cell phone. “Hey look, I gotta run. Class.” I grabbed my backpack from the floor and stood up to shake his hand again. “It was nice to meet you.”

“Mavis, right? Cool name.”

“Thanks.”

“See you around, May-vis,” he called as I headed toward the hallway.

Our friendship was easy. Stephen had his girls from home who came into the city from Connecticut and called him “hon” and chewed on their gum and perched on his windowsill with their knee-length leather boots, and I had my boys too. Once we got that out of the way, we were golden.

The best thing we had in common was alcohol. We both loved it, but in different ways. I was a goody-goody. I carried my glass of wine with me to the computer room and typed away at my history or English papers while getting buzzed. When the work was done I would walk back to my room lightheaded and giddy to refill my glass. Then I’d knock on Stephen’s door. Usually, he would be inside playing his video games with big headphones on, or lying back in his bed watching Planet Earth on his big-screen TV. There would be a half-empty box of Bud Lights sitting in the corner of the room with the cardboard lid popped open.

That spring, Stephen graduated and moved into his own square of an apartment downtown. I moved into another building across the street in preparation for my summer internship at a law office. That was the summer when I had a steamy friendship with a boy named Timothy who liked to smoke on my balcony, where he insisted on calling the sliver of Central Park visible to the East a “view.”

That was the summer when, at twenty years old, I wrote in my journal that my goal for the next decade was to become a corporate lawyer and make six figures. Thinking back on that now makes me cringe. To know that I’ve accomplished it feels almost like nothing at all.

Nothing else was open in Asbury Park, so we stopped at Walgreens. We paced down the bright aisles, starving but unable to commit to anything. We ended up getting a box of extra-butter microwavable popcorn

and gummy worms. Both his choice. I wanted to drink to celebrate my first night of freedom, but I saw Stephen pause as he walked past the cans of beer in the fridge. I didn't say anything.

It was a Wednesday night. In my old life, I would have been a nervous wreck. I may still have been at the office, trying to time my assignment so that I finished right around 9 pm and would get the rest of the night off. Or worse, I would be in Ray's office. Ray was the senior associate with the beady eyes behind little square glasses who would appear at my office door with a smirk and say, "are you busy?"

It was easy to play this game. Constantly thinking back to my previous life and comparing it with my new one. Comparing the hours, the minutes, imagining both worlds in a split-screen film.

I tried to just be in the moment. I am following Stephen out of Walgreens. We just walked past the sliding doors. I can see his boxers where his beach shorts don't cover them. Now we're out in the parking lot, and it's nearly empty. I can smell and hear the ocean.

Stephen tossed me the popcorn and gummy worms over the car.

"So what are your plans?" He asked once we were both inside.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, for tonight, tomorrow, the day after."

I shrugged.

"Got a plan at all?"

"Not really," I said, "But I think I'll only be staying the night."

"You're funny."

I took a deep, long breath and was surprised to realize that I was still shaking. I say "still" because I had been shaking for most of my waking hours since telling my bosses at the Firm that I quit. I had been shaking when I packed up my diplomas and sent my files to records or

the basement to be shredded. I had been shaking when I handed in my Blackberry and building pass back to HR where they had come from years before. When I pressed the button in the elevator bank to go down to the first floor, for the last time. I shook from everywhere—not just my hands or my voice or my lips, but from the core of my body.

It was a weak exit, I realized now. I didn't even know if my coworkers had learned the news. I didn't get to see their mouths drop open with surprise and then clasp close with envy. I wondered if Ray had found out that I was gone before he came to my office to ask "are you free?"

Stephen pulled out of the parking lot and our bodies shifted gently to the left as he turned. He had a really nice car. It had cream leather seats and a double sunroof. It smelled like leather just out of the package, rich and sterile. The engine made a chocolate fondue smooth noise when he stepped on the gas pedal. And when he did, we jetted down the street.

We drove in silence. I knew that he was piecing everything together. We had talked regularly the year after he graduated from college, while I was still in school and living off my homework wine sessions. I knew that Stephen hated it all, his office job, his button-up-suit lifestyle. I had encouraged him to keep at it. I was annoyed that he couldn't come up with any "real" reason why his life just wasn't enough.

Nobody likes their job, but you just keep doing it. This is called being an adult.

Now, Stephen knew what I was doing. After all, he had done the same thing three years ago just as I was entering the labyrinth that he stepped out of. We had lost contact and then picked it up again. Over the years, I had tracked his pictures online. I knew that he had traveled the world, that he had held a position scrubbing floors at a hostel by the

beach in Ecuador, and that he had met a girl in Thailand who he had fallen in love with, but that she was no longer in his life. I knew that he had spent forty-something days climbing the Pyrenees mountains, growing a massive beard in the process, and that he had coached a boys soccer team in Ecuador while working as an English teacher at their elementary school. But now he was back, and he was living in New Jersey and back in the office with his wood management job. Was it all worth it?

We drove down a residential street and parked in the knob of a dead end. I could feel the ocean's grittiness in the air as I carried my one duffel bag and followed Stephen down the sidewalk. He strolled with his hands in his pockets, swaying slightly.

"Here we are," Stephen said, leading me to a small yellow house that was tucked behind a larger house with a white porch. Inside, it was dark. The single room smelled like marinara sauce and something dusty, but also something fragrant, like lavender.

Stephen walked in front of me and turned on a lamp. I was standing in a small kitchen that opened into an even smaller living room. Pots, pans, spatulas and other stirring contraptions filled shelves made from oak boards nailed to the wall. There was also a display of miniature spoons tacked onto a cloth background, and a pencil sketch of a girl posed with her bare butt sticking out. In the living room area, three surfboards rested against a brown suede couch. Along the other wall, there was a crooked staircase leading to a second floor.

"So, this is home, for now," he said, "You like it?"

I thought about it and laughed. "You cook?"

He laughed too. "Nah."

Stephen explained that he rented this backhouse from an old lady who spent most of the year down in Florida. Her grown children lived in

the main house out front with the porch. The pots, pans, cooking utensils, things on the wall were certainly not his. And no, he hadn't learned to cook.

"My bedroom is upstairs, but there's this pullout couch here," Stephen said, motioning towards the couch, "I hear it's quite comfortable, actually."

I looked at him and suddenly wanted to cry. The next thing I knew Stephen was right up next to me and giving me a hug. We stood like that for a while. Then he took a deep breath and his shoulders lifted like he was trying very hard to get rid of something in his body. I stepped back and looked at him.

"Stephen," I said, "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he said.

"You sure?"

"Yea."

"You know you can tell me if something were up."

He pulled me in for another hug. "You must be exhausted."

"I'm okay," I said, "Really."

"Of course you'd say that," he said, "Mavis, you've always pushed yourself so hard. It's okay to burn out."

"I didn't burn out," I said.

It was ridiculous. Of course I had burned out.

In college, Stephen had a poster on his wall of a giant iceberg that was ninety percent submerged in the ocean, so that it looked like just a little bopping piece of ice from the surface. I had always been bothered by that poster – not only for its obvious message, that what lies beneath cannot be seen, but because something like a piece of ice, so innocuous, could grow to be something so dangerous. You think you know something – an ice cube, a can of beer, a wish for a career – and then it grows and be-

comes something you can't deal with anymore.

I thought of this poster now. I would have never imagined back then that Stephen and I would be here, in this little house, on a random Wednesday. I was jobless, almost friendless. I had burned bridges. Where in the world would I end up? Out of all the places in the world that Stephen could have ended up, how did he end up here? And after all these years, how was he the one to take me in?

Stephen broke off my thoughts. He had to get a sweatshirt, he said. I watched his scrawny legs pounding on the wooden staircase. When I could no longer see him, I moved aside a surfing board to sit down on the couch. The board was waxy and much heavier than I had expected. I sank into the couch, exhausted.

I could hear Stephen walking around upstairs, opening and shutting dresser drawers. Then he called my name.

"Yes?" I tried to sit up but my weight just shifted and I sank deeper into the couch.

"You want to microwave that popcorn? I'm starving."

"Oh yeah. Sure." I got up, walked the five steps to the kitchen, put the popcorn in the microwave. I counted the pots and pans and spatulas on the wall. There were so many and I lost count and started again.

Moments later I heard the creak creak creak of Stephen coming down the stairs. I turned and saw his feet first, those long slender toes and then his legs and torso. It was like the opposite of watching someone emerge from the ocean. He held two wine glasses by their stems between his fingers.

He was grinning. "Want to drink?"

Of course I did.

THE AUTHORS

PROSE & POETRY

JOHN MANUEL ARIAS is a gay, Costa Rican/Uruguayan poet and crepe-maker, raised in a DC ghetto when it was the murder capital. An alumnus of Pace University, his poetry has been published by *Acentos Review*, *Ubiquitous Magazine*, and the upcoming issues of *James Franco Review* and *Rust + Moth*. He currently lives in San José, Costa Rica with his grandmother and four ghosts.

VIDUSHI CHAUDHRY lives in Arizona, writes about the India she misses and hopes to capture it in a glass jar filled with amber liquid.

KRISTOFER COLLINS is the Books Editor at *Pittsburgh Magazine*, as well as being a frequent contributor to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. He is the publisher of *Low Ghost Press* and *Coleridge Street Books*. He also manages Caliban Book Shop in Oakland (and owns Desolation Row Records located inside). His latest poetry collection *Local Conditions* was published in 2015. He lives in Stanton Heights, a hidden gem in Pittsburgh's east end with his wife Dr. Anna Johnson and their three cats.

RALPH CULVER grew up in Pittsburgh's eastern suburbs—Edgewood, Penn Hills, Forest Hills—when he left for Vermont in 1970 to study writing and literature at Goddard College (BA, '74). He has remained a Vermonter ever since, although he continued his studies at the New School in New York City and the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. His work appears in many journals, and he is a past grantee in poetry of the Vermont Arts Council, a Pushcart Prize nominee, and winner of the Anabiosis Press Chapbook Prize for his highly praised collection *Both Distances* (2013). A longtime resident of Burlington, Vermont, he can often be seen on the street drawing bemused glances from passers-by for his Pirates cap, which stands out starkly against all the indigenous Red Sox apparel.

STEVIE EDWARDS has two published full-length collections of poetry: *Humanly* (2015) and *Good Grief* (2012). *Good Grief* won two post-publication awards: The Devil's Kitchen Reading Award from Southern Illinois University - Carbondale and The Independent Publisher Book Awards Bronze in Poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Salt Hill*, *The Journal*, *Indiana Review*, *Devil's Lake*, *Rattle*, *Baltimore Review*, *Verse Daily*, and elsewhere. She also serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Muzzle Magazine* and Acquisitions Editor of YesYes Books, and graduated with an MFA in creative writing from Cornell University.

ZIGGY EDWARDS grew up in Pittsburgh, PA and still lives there. Her poems have appeared (or are forthcoming) in publications including *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Illumen*, *5 AM*, *Ship of Fools*, and *Main Street Rag*. Her chapbook, "Hope's White Shoes," was published in 2006.

H. GAN suspects you are apathetic as to the existence of the author's spouse, pet, awards, or sense of humor, but suggests you look for more essays and stories at hiliaryan.com.

LEANNE GRABEL is a Portland poet, performer and special education teacher. Known for her mixed media performances, such as "Badgirls," "Anger: The Musical," and "The Lighter Side of Chronic Depression," Grabel also published a rape memoir *BRONTOSAURUS* (Quiet Lion Press) in 2012. Grabel is currently working on graphic poetry. Some of her illustrated work

can be seen on Inktart.com.

NELS HANSON grew up on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 12, and 14. Poems appeared in *Word Riot*, *Oklahoma Review*, *Pacific Review*, among other magazines, and received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, *Sharkpack Review's* 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.

JIADAI LIN lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico. She has been published in *The Writing Disorder* and is a *Glimmer Train* fiction finalist. She is working on a novel about her former life as a corporate attorney in Manhattan.

JIM MEIROSE's work has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, including *Blueline*, *Ohio Edit*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Innovate*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Witness*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *Xavier Review*, and has been nominated for several awards. Two collections of his short work and three novels have been published. Two new novels will be released in 2015 and 2016 by Montag Press.

TJ REYNOLDS has had his short fiction and poetry published in *Ash and Bone Magazine*, *UC Davis' Writing on the Edge*, and online with *Ant vs. Whale*. Two more poems have been selected for publication this winter by *O-Dark Thirty* magazine. From 2004-2005, TJ served as a machine gunner in Mosul Iraq, fueling his drive to witness, write and record the world as it is. TJ is pursuing an MA at California State University Fullerton and teaches Freshman composition.

JULIE STANDIG, born in Brooklyn, living on Long Island and Doylestown, PA, and works on the Upper West Side in NYC. She has studied at the Unterberg Poetry Center, participated in *Writer's Voice* and is an active member of a private workshop. She has had poems published in *Alehouse Press*, *Arsenic Lobster* and *Covenant of the Generations*. A poem, "In Grandma's Kitchen" is forthcoming in the Then and Now Issue of *Sadie Girl Press*. She writes on trains, late at night and often somewhere between Long Island, Manhattan and Doylestown.

KERRY TRAUTMAN is a founding member of Toledo, Ohio's Almeda St. Poets, and the Toledo Poetry Museum. Kerry is often seen at poetry readings and events such as Artomatic 419, 100 Thousand Poets for Change, and The Columbus Arts Festival. Kerry's poetry and short fiction have appeared in numerous journals, including *Midwestern Gothic*, *Alimentum*, *Think Journal*, *Mock Turtle Zine*, *The Coe Review*, *The Fourth River* and *Third Wednesday*; as well as in anthologies such as, "Mourning Sickness" (Omniarts, 2008), "Roll" (Telling Our Stories Press, 2012), and "Journey to Crone" (Chuffed Buff Books, 2013). Her poetry chapbook, "Things That Come in Boxes," was published by King Craft Press in 2012. Her chapbook, "To Have Hoped," was published by Finishing Line Press in 2015.

SCOTT WORDSMAN is an MFA candidate at William Paterson University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Slipstream Press*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Spry*, *The Puritan*, *Futures Trading*, and others. He lives in Jersey City, New Jersey and edits for *Map Literary*.

VISUAL ART

LEVI COLTON is an up and coming artist in the Pittsburgh area who creates under the alias “Mogli.”

Born in Canada and bred in the U.S., ALLEN FORREST has worked in many mediums: computer graphics, theater, digital music, film, video, drawing and painting. Allen studied acting in the Columbia Pictures Talent Program in Los Angeles and digital media in art and design at Bellevue College (receiving degrees in Web Multimedia Authoring and Digital Video Production.) He currently works in the Vancouver, Canada, as a graphic artist and painter. He is the winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University’s *Reed Magazine* and his Bel Red painting series is part of the Bellevue College Foundation’s permanent art collection. Forrest’s expressive drawing and painting style is a mix of avant-garde expressionism and post-Impressionist elements reminiscent of van Gogh, creating emotion on canvas.

ASHLEY GARNER grew up in Central PA, earned her BFA in Painting from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in 2014, and is now living and working in Pittsburgh, PA. She enjoys working with the human figure and takes inspiration for her paintings from daily influences and experiences. Her work has been shown in various solo and juried shows that include the following: Erie Art Museum, Erie, PA; Bruce Gallery, Edinboro, PA; Urraro Gallery Artists’ Collective, Erie, PA; RAW, Pittsburgh, PA; Double Mirror Exhibit, Pittsburgh, PA; and Shaw Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA.

FELICITY JONES has been creating art for as long as she can remember. Although primarily self-taught, Felicity was mentored by Marjorie Kinch, a watercolor artist. Felicity works with various mediums, but she particularly enjoys ink and pen. When creating pieces, she mixes traditional and non conventional methods. Originally from Oregon, Felicity currently lives in Pittsburgh, PA .

ANNA LISA SCHNEIDER is a decent human being who draws funny pictures of terrible things to make other people laugh. “Why can’t you just draw something nice?” is something that her grandmother asks her frequently. Anna Lisa designs beer labels for a living, and draws a webcomic called Inward Bound for fun. It sure is neat.

KIM McANINCH is an artist with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Miami University, living and working in Downtown Pittsburgh. Her experience as a wallpaper designer as well as an interior designer has laid the groundwork for her textural paintings. Kim’s paintings, created with brush, palette knife and oil pastels are characterized by painterly, gestural lines and often termed Expressionistic. The goal of her work is to offer more information with less detail.

DENNIS ROTH’s loose style results from his approach to the medium as a partnership between him, the paper, the the water and the paints. His painting “Evening Light” was published in the collection Splash 13 as one of the best American watercolors of 2012. He also publishes short stories and poetry, with work either published or forthcoming in *Jenny*, *Danse Macabre*, *Open Minds Quarterly* and the anthology *Sky*. He lives with his wife in Pittsburgh.

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 www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com.

JÖKULL HELGI SIGURÐSSON is currently in his second year at the Icelantic Academy of the Arts in Reykjavik. He mostly paints pictures of the things around him, things he hears and sees, and the souls of his friends. He makes his art with a sense of vertigo, and a style of abstraction which only to an extent allows the subject to come into form, because he find that permanence, in itself, is temporary.

