



SURGAM

Spring '20


Surgam is the literary magazine of the **Philolexian Society**. We publish three issues a year: conventional Fall and Spring editions, and a Winter edition that features poems from Philo's annual **Alfred Joyce Kilmer Memorial Bad Poetry Contest**.

To submit literary and artistic works for print publication, or film and music works for online publication, email submitzsurgam@gmail.com.

The **Philolexian Society** is a literary and debate society and the oldest student group on campus. Debates are held every Thursday night.

For more information, past issues, and online content visit surgammag.wordpress.com.

SURGAM



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Moderator of the Philoexian Society

John Shelby Street



It is with great honor that we present the Spring 2020 edition of Surgam. This semester saw over 150 submissions from many sects of the Columbia Community, particularly from writers and artists inspired to create amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic. Operating (virtually) continuously since 1802, Philo strives to continue our commitment to promoting literary awareness and the art of rhetoric among our members and communities. Surgam, by publishing art and literature that pushes boundaries, continues to be the perfect vessel for which this can be accomplished. This issue features the work of past contributors and new ones, including several artists and writers who will proudly call Surgam their publishing debut. The Editorial Board and I feel so honored to have had the opportunity to consider all the work we received, and we hope that you will be just as moved by these pieces as we were. Please enjoy our magazine, and hold fast to the spirit of youth.

Best, Alla Ismail Issa



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After Joseph Mitchell

Julian Pecht

I first met Norm Kearney at the Mittelman Observatory, the same night when I discovered the unique pleasure of Vermont stargazing. I was studying German at Middlebury's Language Schools. For four semesters and the summer in between I had been living in Manhattan, and this particular summer I designed to be a break from urban, or even suburban, life. Thus I found myself taking in the short green-blue mountains, the cars that always stopped before crosswalks, and the mellow stars that came out in the evenings. It was a relaxing change of pace.

Midway through my first week was when I noticed the stars. I had been told of an open night at the campus observatory, and, having nothing better to do, went. The observatory is located at the top of Bicentennial Hall, a large building dating from the early 2000s and located on the edge of the campus. An elevator brings you to the seventh floor, with a small waiting room, a staircase leading into the observatory proper, and a set of doors opening onto a rooftop terrace overlooking the adjacent farm. I arrived at around 9:15. A line had formed down the staircase, through the waiting room, and onto the roof. I made my way to the end of it and looked over the farm. The sun had not yet fully set and the sky was a mix of dark blues and purple at the horizon; a few stars were visible, but not in any striking way.

The line progressed slowly, and it was close to 10 p.m. when I finally entered the observatory. Inside was dark, too dark to see much. A few people were whispering, and the attendant in charge was giving some information on where the telescope was pointed. The attendant beckoned me forward and I approached the machine. It took me a second to figure where my eye should go. Then I found the circular lens and looked at the cluster of stars in view. They were white and not particularly clear, little splotches against a black background. It was strangely, mesmerizingly bland. There was nothing much to look at, and yet the only reason compelling me to quit staring was the line of curious people waiting on me. Somewhat begrudgingly I parted from the telescope and made my way back downstairs.

By the time I stepped back onto the rooftop, the sun was fully set. It was then that I first really stargazed. The sheer number was astounding: how many there were, how many had always been there, but just out of sight. Each star seemed new to me, including the ones in recognizable constellations that not even metropolitan light pollution

conceals. I stood on the roof, back erect, neck bent back, and took everything in with outstretched eyes. After a few minutes I got it in my head to let my friends know about this new pleasure. Some form of illumination was my own duty, I thought. I took out my phone and tried to take a picture, yet all that appeared on the screen was a black wall, as if I had not taken my phone from my pocket in the first place. I sighed.

“They really don’t come out, do they?” asked a friendly voice.

I looked to my left and saw a man. The rooftop was dimly lit, and it was hard to see him clearly. He looked about seventy, several inches taller than I was, with dull hair. His face had a healthy and white beard, like an advanced version of my recently grown one, and he was wearing a dark t-shirt with dark shorts.

“No, they don’t.” I replied with the polite tone and smile I normally use for conversations I have little interest in continuing. I rather liked the quiet relationship budding between the stars and me, and any conversation was an interruption.

“I guess you need a long exposure camera, or something,” he said. “I don’t really know much about photographing stars. All I know is that you won’t be getting any National Geographic shots with that thing there.” I gave a light laugh and said I agreed. The man was not yet ready to end the conversation. “The observatory’s pretty interesting, huh? I’ve got a telescope for my backyard, but it isn’t the same. I like coming to these events, they’re a good opportunity to study the stars. I never got to do that when I was younger, when I was your age and all, or I never had the desire. But now I can, and I do.” He let out a good-natured chuckle, and I followed suit.

He craned his neck to the sky, took in one final gaze, and turned back to me. “Well, I have to be going, old people with their early bed-times, you know. Perhaps I’ll see you next time,” he said, still smiling, and walked slowly to the rooftop’s exit. I stood there for a few minutes more, head pointed up, until I had had enough.

By the time I was back on the ground floor he was gone from my mind. Walking the short distance between Bicentennial Hall and my dorm, I gave myself one more peek at the stars. However, the streetlights were too regular along the sidewalk, and they gave off too much light. I could still see a fair number of stars, more than were visible back home, but none had the same intensity as before. After a couple of seconds I brought my head back to earth and kept on walking.

A few weeks later I met Norm for a second time. I was in a supermarket, Hannaford’s, on the outskirts of town. Normally I would go

to Shaw's, a fifteen minute walk from my dorm, but that day I was interested in exploring. Hannaford's was forty minutes away by foot, and I reached it around noon. I was in the jam section, comparing the flavors of the Trappist offerings—Vermont supermarkets typically have excellent jam and jelly selections, I had found—when I heard someone trying to talk to me through my headphones.

“Hello!” spoke the same man from before. I was surprised, but reacted in a friendly manner. Now in normal lighting I had a proper view of him. His manner was genial and his face was slightly reddish, in contrast to the white hairs surrounding it. The redness seemed to start from his just-overlarge nose, spreading onto his cheeks and echoed on his brow. Once again he had on a t-shirt, plain black, but this time paired with deep-hued jeans. In front of him was a shopping cart holding an array of bread and orange and white cheeses.

“We met at the observatory, you remember, I'm sure. My name's Norm, by the way, Norm Kearney.” I introduced myself likewise. “Here for the summer, for the Language Schools? Ah, German, sure, hard language, although I guess you're not taking the pledge too seriously! But no worries, I won't tell.” He laughed. “Everyone needs some kind of break, I imagine.”

Norm was right. Four weeks of immersion in a language I had not known at all had tired me, and had made me more receptive to conversation than at the observatory. Naturally I hadn't been in total immersion; in fact, my snapchatting with some friends had only increased. All the same, I hadn't had a real conversation face to face with anyone for about a month. Norm was offering one, so I took it.

“Yeah, it's been challenging, the language and the pledge both. I've taken an intensive language class before, for Latin, but that didn't require the same kind of isolation.”

“Oh, Latin, very good. I took some back in school, Catholic school, you know, back when Latin Mass was still practiced. But I was never very good at Latin, dropped it once I graduated high school. Dropped the church too, for that matter. Don't really miss that, but there are times I wish I kept my Latin up. I don't know if you've been to the bookstore in Marble Works, Otter Creek, but they've got a great selection of Latin books, if you're interested. Great selection all around, much better than the one on Main Street, that's for sure.”

The bookstore was on my radar, I told him, but I hadn't gone yet. I was still checking out the different grocery stores in town, judging each by the jam aisles. I told him I liked looking at the packaging, the glass and the labels and flavors, and that I wanted one to bring home.

“I’d suggest the boysenberry here, that’s a good one. This one here’s a local company, great stuff, won’t find it back home, assuming you’re not from here. Myself, I’m just picking up some food for lunch. I was thinking grilled cheese, but I didn’t have the right kind of cheese, or bread. But this here’s enough, more than enough really. In fact, if you haven’t eaten, you’re welcome to join me, no problem at all.”

Normally I am not the type to join a stranger for lunch but I said yes to him. Perhaps it was being starved for English, perhaps his friendliness simply overcame my aloofness. Regardless, I took the boysenberry jam in my hand and walked with him to the check-out lanes.

Norm’s house was about a ten minute drive from Hannaford’s. It was unostentatious, two floors with a front gable and no porch. The house was painted white and had a row of orange daylilies standing on either side of the door. The inside was a bit cramped, but not particularly messy. He led me first through a living room with a couch, two armchairs, and a fireplace that looked functional. Bookshelves lined two walls, filled eclectically but with mostly older books. The red spines of a few Loeb editions caught my eyes, but I did not catch what they were.

We passed into the kitchen, a smaller room with a plain wooden table and two chairs under a window. He told me to sit down as he prepared placed a tab of butter onto a pan.

“How does cheddar and Swiss on oatnut bread sound? I know some people like ham in their grilled cheese, but I’m a vegetarian. Been so for ages, ever since my sophomore year in college. I don’t even eat fish or clams or other seafood, but that’s just as much on account of taste as morals. Slimy things, stinky too.” He inserted cheese slices between the bread, placed two sandwiches on the pan, now over the stovetop, and poured us each a glass of water from the sink. “In fact, I always had a distrust of the ocean. I don’t like to think about what else is sharing the water. Take one wrong step and, well, you don’t know what you’ve even stepped on, but Jesus I don’t like it. A lot of people like the ocean, the sea, what have you, but not me. Any time I read about the ocean as a metaphor, how profound, deep, all-encompassing and unknown, my eyes just glaze over. It’s like writers never look up. You want something accessible yet unknowable, take the sky, take space. How far did we look with that telescope, say, and what did we really see? But you don’t need to travel to see what’s above, no treks up the beach or voyages in some great big boat, hell, you can go outside and jump up and then you’re basically in it. What’s more, you’ll never even worry about what you’re stepping on while you’re in it.”

He flipped the sandwiches with a spatula.

“Anyway, I saw you looking at the Loeb’s.” I had told him at the checkout line that I was a classics major. “Like I said, I never really got Latin down, but I do enjoy having the real text next to me when I’m reading one of those works. I like to get a sense of the vocabulary.” I asked him how often he read them and what he liked to read in general.

“I’ll read just about anything, fiction or nonfiction, Western, Eastern, high brow or low brow, whatever. I’ve got time, you know? I’ve been retired about five years now, I used to work at the college’s library, so I guess I’ve been exposed to all kinds of books. Read a lot back then, and I’m reading a lot more now. Speaking of the Loeb’s, though, one I enjoyed pretty recently was Horace, his *Satires* and *Epistles*, you ever read any of those?”

“Yes, a few of the satires mostly,” I said. “There’s a line from the *Epistles* though, maybe you remember, that I think you’d like. ‘They change their sky, not their spirit, who run across the sea.’”

Norm stayed silent and added potato chips to plates he had set out. He decided the grilled cheeses were ready, transferred them to the plates, and brought them to the table.

“I don’t quite recall it. That’s a nice sentiment, but I’m not too sure I agree with it.”

I smiled, shrugged, and bit into the sandwich. He looked at his and then spoke further.

“You know, there was a woman who used to live just down the block from me here, a Mrs. Amy Alice Mayer, née Caldwell, if I’m not mistaken. She was the local librarian for quite a few decades, since before I moved here, until she retired, close to ten years ago. We used to chit chat and talk on the similarities of our jobs and whatnot. She grew up in town, even attended the college—her father was a professor, English I believe. A very sweet woman.

“She got married right out of college, a classmate named George, rather quiet, and they decided to stay in town. There was just nowhere else she really wanted to live, she always said, and I always got the feeling George didn’t care where he lived one way or the other. He wanted to be a writer, ended up working for the newspaper. Anyway, they bought the house down the street, had a few kids, three, and she took a job at the library. Amy was a big presence in town, like I guess a lot of lifers are, but she was a good presence. Not your average townie, I guess. She was real social, hosting events at the library and parties at her home. I’d go there every New Year’s, look forward to it, and I wasn’t the only one.

“About ten years ago George died, prostate cancer. Amy was

turning seventy or so, and decided she just wanted to retire. She started keeping to herself, never out much, which was understandable. People grieve, they mourn, you know. But time went by and she never rejoined the town. She never appeared at functions, certainly never threw a party, neglected her garden out front, would never talk much if you did catch her in the street. Everything about her seemed to have left, you would never have imagined what she'd been like just a year or two before.

“But that wasn’t the whole of it. One day, about five or six years into her reclusion, she taped up a piece of paper to her front door, some kind of crazy note warning against intruders and trespassers, that sort of thing. She was convinced someone was trying to pressure her into moving out. The note said a man had left packages on her doorpost with messages to scare her, harass her, and that the next time a package came she would call the police. Some days she would even stand across the street, half hidden in her neighbors’ trees, watching her door. Seventy five years old! You’d approach her, and she’d always say ‘I’m keeping an eye on things.’” Norm raised his voice, in imitation of an old lady. “Sometimes Amy’d rant about ‘the state of things,’ about what the town was coming to, that this wasn’t the Middlebury she’d lived her whole life in, she couldn’t believe someone would do this to her, or that the cops wouldn’t help her. Just lunacy. Anyway, after a decent amount of effort—he was really pushing for years—one of her sons, Marty, convinced her to just sell the damn house and move closer to him, all the way in Virginia. They found a buyer, one Amy checked many times over, making sure she wasn’t in cahoots with this mysterious adversary, and then she packed up and left to live outside Vermont for the first time in her life, aged 78.

“About six months later she started sending letters, a New Years card of sorts. I got one, some of her former coworkers did, and other friends she hadn’t spoken to in what felt like forever. She said that she was doing fine, that she had gotten involved with her new town’s library, senior center too, just volunteering, all the while not mentioning the man she’d spent so much time guarding against. She even sent me a newspaper clipping, a picture of her at a senior’s book club, her initiative. Ten members. I wrote her back, of course, I think everyone did, thrilled to see her back to herself again, and now she sends letters every few months. Bizarre, like a miracle, to be honest.”

He looked out the window and onto the backyard where his telescope was set up. He turned back to his sandwich and took a bite.

“Then again,” he said, chewing. “Won’t find me running across the sea anytime soon.”

Love Letter to My Quarantined Body

Eliza Rudalevige

It's cold,
cold enough that the fat
slants of rain
might yet turn into snow,
even in late April.
(Fucking ridiculous.)
Then again, maybe not
as ridiculous as syringes
full of aqua jelly,
jabbed into the crook of
the elbow,
where the skin is thin enough
to take the joke,
or bleach baths,
although that could prove a blessing:
To shed a full skin
and writhe,
white, white, white porcelain cool
against chemical burns.
Are bath tubs still made out
of porcelain?
Add it to the list of questions,
after "How do I make my body move?"
and
"When did I last change the sheets?"

Rose Garden

Mackenzie Collins

She wanted a rose garden
I gave her the entire fucking cemetery
She died laughing
and left Me, her body to bury



Apocalypse

Elysa Caso-Mchugh

I had a dream
The world was ending.

There were Ferris wheels
Hanging onto the edge of the island

The rich people rode them,

Admiring the pink glow
From the neon lights,

While the oceans
And the rivers
Raged below

And the sky was almost black.

I ordered dinner,
My heart stopped as I read the prices;
Too much for steak,
For Lo Mein,

This is the cost of a good time
In a world that is crumbling,

Many will pay
If it means
They don't have to burn
With the rest of us.

I can't describe this dream
Much more than just this:

The world is burning in it,
And the sky is grayer than any gray I've seen
And I knew it was all ending,

And yet,
I still went
To the tip of manhattan
Where the Ferris wheels
And the billionaire amusements

Carried on
While being engulfed by waves

And ordered dinner.

My Worth (April 10, 2020, Yardley, PA)

Spencer J. Szwalbenest

My worth is not a postulate
that I can know by proof;
there is no truth table
which can derive self-love
no abstract or Cliff's Notes
which can outline self-forgiveness.

Neither is my worth some classic sonnet
that I can write down carefully
for frantic days when I have underslept;
there is no *Norton Anthology*
of *Great American Self-Confidence*.



And in front of the class,
 when I have forgotten
 the middle verses of my worth,
either my English teacher will feed me a line
or I will go on blank and stammering
 like an indecisive customer
at a crowded deli counter.

Rather, my worth is a homespun god
 ridiculous when argued for
 by some stuffy Greek or German
but somehow far more palatable
when presented by my local rabbi—
his hands grasping
 warmly the sides of his wooden lectern.

Or perhaps my worth is the distant beloved
 that the knight errant longs from afar to glimpse;
and when he finally does
 it is only for a flickering instant.
The knight really knows her best—
 not when she is right in front of him
but when she is a country away
 and he, in his dark corner,
is writing her a poem.



An Afternoon Gone to a Headache

Solomia Dzhaman

This morning I awoke to fingernails torn to shreds. Ragged cuticles encircling nails and bloody fingerprints dotting my walls. I sit through three and a half lectures. Leave in the middle of Linear Algebra, I cannot think in straight lines, in fact I cannot think at all.

The Russian woman at the barbershop asks me what I am studying. I have a split second to decide whether I should tell her the truth. What harm would a little lie do? I could be Sam studying English. I could be Jordan studying PoliSci.

I am not.

I answer truthfully.

She cuts my hair, and we fall into a silence.

A hand is petting my head, oh how I've missed being touched. It traces my freshly shaven head, my eyebrows, my chin. I feel pressure and relief.

The other day, as I handed my card to the cashier at the grocery store, our hands touched. For a split second, I felt the cashier's pulse, her worries, her deepest secret, the name of her dog. I wanted to reach out, to hold her hand, to look into her eyes. I don't think she understood the gravity of the moment, that we are now bonded eternally.

Touch-starved, that is what they call me.

I left the bodega, soda in hand.

It touches my forehead. Cool fingertips trace out letters to a word I do not understand.

MAOLTFTTTIWTWS

Meaningless array of letters, the fingers trace trace trace.

I wish they would stop.

I try to think back to when the hand started touching me, and realize I don't remember.

I feel fleas in my veins, itching crawling. They want to emerge from my nostrils, but I hold in a puff of air. I contain them.

My skull feels the fleas most. Swarming around my brain, they bounce off thick bone walls. Pink flesh engulfs them, they nibble on tissue and chirp at each other. Slow, gentle chirps. In those small flea whispers, I know they are communicating secrets.

Maybe one day I will learn the flea-language. I feel pressure behind my eyes, filling the dips in my skull. Too bad, now their thoughts have taken over mine, and so I am full of hum and static.

The hand is tracing my eyeballs. Hard and unyielding, plump. My head pounds, the pressure on my eyelids rises.

Two Advil Liquid Gels Do Not Help Me In The Slightest.

A splash of cool water. A prayer. I have work later, I hope I can walk. I numb the lights. Numb the curtains. Numb my mobile devices. Numb my speaker. Numb the parts of my body that are not already numb. My mind remains, stick-straight, knife-sharp. The hand remains, tap tap tap.

I wish I could exit my corpse, just for a moment. Or that it could leave me. I regret my limbs and my hair and my fingernails. I wish to float, I wish to feel only wind, I wish for many things.

The hand has stopped rapping my skull, it is occupied with organs. Finger massages a rubbery ball. Squeeze, compress, nearly-burst. Fidget fidget fidget. Slimy exterior, plump shell. If I do not massage, I am afraid I'll scream.

The fleas have shifted their focus. Their chirps are screams. No asking or telling will convince them to calm down. All the while, their anger fills me, their sadness confuses me, and I tell them to stop, again and again. Words like wounds, pained and stripped of the metaphor. I've begun to mumble, addressing the hand.
"What have you got there. Let it go."

No

Hand grasps orange. Or was it a ball? Hand caresses orange. Peeling comes naturally.

Soon there is nothing left of the shell (skin?).
Orange (red?) juice runs down fingers.
Runs down sleeves, somehow it has gotten onto (out of?) my face.
I need a napkin (bandage?).
This juice tastes salty and metallic (why is it warm?).
Oranges are not salty (I think?).
My strange twisted fruit is nearly gone (or have I just stopped seeing it?).

I am left alone with blind thoughts (or a blind mind?).

Fleas jump out of the new holes in my face. More exit my nostril. They pour out of orifices. Covering my skin.

I lie down. I cannot keep standing. I feel my flesh meld with the fleas, with the orange, with the blood.

My eyes are no longer balls, just peeled and shredded.

On the ground, my lungs open and I feel myself fill the air with a scream.

I do not hear it. The hand pets my hair, and I return back to numbness.



Later, once I am released from Room 342, my mother wants to have a Conversation.

I have lost the bandages, the IV drip, left the syringes behind.

“Why did you do it?” she asks.

“I didn’t” I reply, truthfully.

“Why would you do it?” she repeats.

“I didn’t” I reply, she does not believe me.

The hand grips my arm, it knows why, but lipless, it can’t say.

Eyeless, I cannot see my mother’s face.

It is not sorry.



[I Could Have Been a Nun]

Alessandra Allen

1. I could have been a nun. All I needed was to tell my grandmother and the convent would have come to me. In La Paz, where I am partly from, the mountains are a bowl. Their peaks are the frayed cornice of the sky, which is pale in the morning and at night becomes ice. There is no air there. If you turn the corner of a windy road you will meet Jesus directly overhead. No one is reluctant when approaching this statue. Its downhill glance does not offend the meek or the lost. These mountains belong to the climbers, not the rich. At the top of *La Muela del Diablo*, you lose the structure of the tooth. I know because the convent took me there. Only the tawny volcanic bloomings are legible. And from above, all that farmland, all those mines.
2. Anything that deals with place. Any kind of highly contested accident that determines access. Any mountain at the top of which my lungs are burning. And the Bolivians are praying. And I've found myself on my knees. They give me a sheet with questions about God. I no longer remember what it says because over time I have become another American in the ivy league. That which moved me is lost to me. I am lesbian. There are men who have hurt me and they were Bolivian. There is family that has disowned me and they are Bolivian. At the base of the mountain, I enter a minibus with my American father and two passports, one red and one blue. I cross a fence my siblings cannot.
3. Like any poem, these words are the shadow of the truth. All I know is that on the *Muela* I felt faith and it sat heavy on my chest. True to my practice I search for you, God, in the monuments of the street. In Bryant Park, Gertrude Stein is not praying. Her back is arched. A man with a cigarette thrusts his hips in her direction. He is not a climber; he is not meek. New York City is nothing like La Paz. Compared to the mountains, these buildings are the rotted carcasses of stone, tomb-like and watching. They beat down the back of Gertrude Stein and they have curved it with their looking.



ceilidh

Eliza Rudalevige

Again, watching.
Again, chiselling my stomach inwards with
calculated breaths,
as if perhaps the angel would emerge--
but this is not cold and marble and white.
Except,
maybe white.
Maybe bread broken before plunging in the stew,
maybe noses with freckles,
thick socks under ghillie strings,
my legs.

Everybody's legs--
we are Irish.
Or a quarter.

Is there even a "we," or,
if so, one
that I have yet to swaddle close
to my breastbone and sing a lullaby to
(cagaran gaolach or whisper
in words with too many consonants
to sound so soft?

I'd like to be named Saoirse,
as in freedom,
as in hush of waves against gentle bluffs.
The bluffs are gentle,
never the waves;
the ocean carries boats with leaks and
ceilidhs on the lower decks.

Wood blocks are strapped to Sunday shoes
(or else glued to last year's)
stomping self-same rhythms with
ancient agency,
that striking that has changed in timbre over multitudes
and multitudinous years
but never in
or on
Purpose.

And here we are back on the second floor of the pub,
or what passes for one,
called rí rá for good fun,
whose sign is green and gold and claims a knot.
My family claims no knot.
Only vague wisps of ringlets,
coal mining,
mill work,
the name, "Burns."

Again, watching my own feet
in the swathe of laughter.
Dancers clasp hands in
intermittent embrace,
fingers interlocked or palms
sweating against one another.
Unlearned,
or rather not what I learned in front of
The mirror that needed washing in the basement of
the community center:

that I am the lady
(except when there were no boys and I was the tallest)
(which was often)
(which made me feel large and gawking)
and my hand is the bird.
You are the gentleman and cup her,
gently.
I point my toes and
they are stepped on.

In the frenzy of welcome,
I am the unwilling resistor.

Re: sisters.
Two whisk one (me)
into the valley between them
and I am shy,
of dancing or of the commitment
to joy.
The mountains are gentle, never the river

that cuts them in two
where I am harder than stone and leftover soda bread.

We fold our arms together in the same pattern
they have always been folded
Move our feet in the circles that have always
Been moved through
More than tracing
Easiness in a three-hand made up of
Six hands and a reel
Beat into the Earth.

“I am not Irish,”
the ocean is adamant.
The bluffs are gentle--
call mine



Virgin Mary (I wrote this when I was mad high)*

Sophia Van Slyck

You fill what does not matter,
what does not care about
you filling it.
You become as the days pass and
you become as I walk to your house
every step is a becoming for you
so why do I take them?
None of them will become steps
for me, they are just a form of walking
so simplified that it becomes not a
way to travel but only a way to come.
Yes this is about sex but
to me it is only about sex about longing
for fullness in the one way I can get it.
It is for days when my body becomes
no longer my own to be owned by what will
become a return of belonging.
The steps I am not taking, my body is,
become a return to walking as a way to travel.
You fill what reminds my body
it exists for others, so it must exist for me.

**Editorial Note: This piece was originally untitled, but the author expressed that they would be okay with the Editorial Board titling it. We choose to use our favorite title of all the submissions, one that came from a poem by Mackenzie Collins. We thank Mackenzie for allowing us to use their title for this piece.*

An ode to combo over rice from the 115th halal cart: a poem for the end of things

Dylan Temel

“Combo over rice, please.”
The words feel different in my mouth today.
I wonder if they sound the same from inside the cart.
I wonder if Abraham knows I am asking to assuage not only a bodily hunger
But also a nagging sense of longing for something not quite tangible,
Which arises only as it is about to be taken away.

He smiles, perhaps having read my mind, as if to say,
“This too will pass, my son.”
It nearly breaks me.

In these uncertain times, the only solace lies in constancy.
The truck’s parking spot; the cost of combo over rice;
The taste—oh, but how differently the meal tastes today!
Each mouthful is one bite closer to leaving.
Each forkful of halal one step closer to a world without it;
A world without everything that halal has come to mean to me,
Which I cannot bring myself to put into words.
Finality, or the mere impression thereof,
Is infinitely more pungent than red sauce.

Some say life is ending; if only this were true.
Then all I would need to be is drunk, and afraid,
Waiting for the world to go away,
And I could drown myself in white sauce,
And close my eyes, and go to sleep.
But alas, friends, at dawn, the sun will rise over the law school cart in
the east,
And at dusk, set over the 115th street cart in the west.
Time will press on, with or without us.
And combo over rice will still cost 7 dollars.
I hope the price will not change by the time I return,
Whenever that may be,
For 7 dollars is all I have on me.
Otherwise, I will have to venmo you.
Please be with me, then and now.

Under the Weeping Willow

Crystal A. Foretia

In the haze of a Selma morning,
I can feel the trees breathe with anticipation.

Dewy, black earth threatens to sink me,
In the circle of bones
And flags dripping with blood
And blue, star-studded crosses.



I step into the center.
Here lies Forrest;
No, not the one played by Tom Hanks,
—a patriotic, loving everyman,
But his namesake:

“Nathan Bedford Forrest,” reads his plaque.
It continues,

“Self-made millionaire through various business ventures”
including the plunder of Black lives, from cradle to grave
“His wealth would be used...in the war effort against the North”
shackling the bodies that gave him his freedom
“Displayed an uncanny ability at war”
slaying hundreds of Black Union troops waving the white flag

I can't help but linger
On the pesky details left unwritten:

A man so brave, he cloaked himself

With ivory sheets and burning crosses
To conduct his hateful wizardry—

Treacherous, malignant blue blood.

Turning away from the plaque, I'm caught by his statue.
As Forrest's withering eyes pierce mine,
One image burns itself in my mind:

His sons marching in the name of Lee, Davis,
And other rebel brethren
In the streets of Charlottesville,
Long after his daughters erected his statue
To blur the line between dissent and disloyalty.

Returning to the world of dilapidated houses
And cracked roads, I slip back into myself.
As I let go, willow leaves fade to grey;
Their branches weighed down
By the ghosts of a Lost Cause.



AN AMERICAN POEM after Eileen Myles

David Ehmcke

all my life
has been a game
of diaspora
and distance.
i have seen
the bulbous grey
of the atom bomb
from the incredible sheen
of a cellphone screen.
i came to america
with all my chips
on the table
and a knife
in my pocket.
i am a friend
to the common man.
i stink the soft stink
of diplomacy.
in my bright blue
balaclava, i look
ineffably princely.
i've done all this
and am still convinced
that i've lived
a truly american life.
that was back
in my red days.
i've learned things now
and have heard secrets
in the night. one night
every billboard in my
neighborhood was branded
with *someone you love
might be a russian.*
they're right.
i am a russian.
twin sputniks dazzle
like stars in the dark
of my eyeholes.
i've a spacedog
at home and a dancing bear

always inside my mind.
your cellphone? i've
tapped it.
your election? i've
rigged it. i've
done all this
shirtless while wrestling
an american capitalist.
poems? i've no time
for poems. i'm
too busy plotting
the destruction
of your markets
and democracy. and what
could be more terrifying
than a country
without a market
where the poet
can sell her poems
for green, american money
or exchange them for goods
like toothpaste
or the new iphone.
could you think
of a worse country
to live in? surely,
this is why americans make
the best poets
and politicians.
don't you wish
you could make
like that? like them?
with them? i do,
but all i can do is dream.
i dream american dreams
and i dream them
in russian. after all,
i am a russian. everyone
in this room is a russian.
and aren't we all afraid?



Excerpt from **FEED**

David Ehmcke

(note)

*There is light or there is dark.
There is body or there is text.
There may be text or texts or texting.
There may be bodies when we need them.*

*There are screens.
There are friends and there are followers.
There is always metaphor.*

*There may be ecstasy, but it is not visionary.
The visionary is the principle of old. What we “see” now is electricity.
To feel electric. To feel ecstatic.*

*Electricity is the new governing principle of creativity.
Creativity is a toy. It can save us if we let it.*

*If the room be silent may the silence only sharpen.
If the room be empty let us fill it with what it requires.*

*This is a play about the audience.
A play is always for the audience except when it isn't.
Tautology, too, is a toy. It can tell us the same thing differently.*

*The audience should enter the arena as if invited.
Let us call the arena EMERGENCY.
Emergency happens. Hospitality also happens.*

*Opacity is a tool for the director, who is ~~a~~ visionary
Electricity.*

*The audience should not leave the arena thinking opacity.
Opacity is a tool.
All technologies are fundamentally ambivalent.
Theatre is the least ambivalent art, or can be.*

Let us be electric in the audience, in a shared experience of vigilant receptivity.

a

- A Sorry. I'm new to this.
 B Don't worry. Me too.
 A So, what do we do?
 B We talk.
 A Okay.
 B Okay.
 A We're talking.
 B Okay. I mean, yes.
 A What next.

b

- A Hey.
 B Hey.
 A I miss you.
 B Yeah?
 A Yeah.
 B Oh.
 A Uh huh.
Silence.
 B Thanks.
Silence.
 A What?
 B What?
 A Thanks?
 B You're welcome.
 A No. What?
 B Thanks.
 A Seriously?
 B Yeah.
 A Fuck.
 B I'm sorry?
 A Whatever. It's fine.
 B Okay.
 A It's just—
 B What?
 A I miss you.

c

- A It's not that I don't love talking to you.
 B Oh?
 A It's just—
 I want to talk to someone who already knows me. Who already understands everything about me. I mean, it's just...exhausting. You know, all this talking. I want to get past all the talking and right to the living. You know?
 B Yeah—
 A Great. I mean, you seem like a great person. And I would love to get to know you, but I'm just operating at maximum capacity. It's time for me to take time for me. And I'm just not looking for that kind of thing right now, that thing you were thinking. I'm ready for something real. Something more than this.
 B Okay.
 A I'm really sorry.

d

- B Can you hear me?
Silence.
 B How about now?
Silence.
 B How about now?
Silence.
 B Fuck—this thing is useless. Did you lose me?
Silence.
 B Great. Wait. What was I saying?

e

B How did it go?
 A Great.
 B That's great.
 A Yeah.
 B Tell me about it.
 A They thought I was great.
 B That's great.
 Silence.
 Silence.
 Silence.
 A And how was it for you?
 B It was great.
 A That's great.

f

A Tell you something?
 B Yeah.
 A Well what do you want me to tell you?
 B How about the one about the rabbit and the boy.
 A But you already know that one.
 B No, I just want to listen to your voice.

g

phone conversations, fragments
 , "Oh yeah"
 , "No yeah"
 , "Yeah no"
 "Mhmm"
 "Terrific"
 "Great"

h

B What do you look like today?
 A I look like myself.
 B Describe yourself to me, sexy.
 A You know what I look like.
 B But I want to hear what you look like. From you.
 A I—
 B Tell me about your thighs.
 A What about my thighs.
 B Tell me what your thighs look like to you.
 A They look like thighs.
 Silence.
 B This isn't working for me.
 Silence.
 A Well, tell me about you. For practice. For me. Tell me about your eyes. What do your eyes look like?
 B My eyes?
 A Yeah, your eyes.
 B Well
 Silence.
 B My eyes look like eyes.

i

A But I want to be here with you. I miss you.
 B I have to get up early tomorrow. I have to hang up now.

j

A Shh! Just like that. Don't talk.

B Just like this?

A Shh! Yes, just like that.

B Mhmm?

A Yeah, just like that. I want to listen to your breathing.

k

B I already heard that joke.

A What do you mean?

B You tweeted it.

A No, I didn't.

B Yeah, you did.

A Well I don't remember.

B It was a year ago.

A How do you know?

B I was looking at your old stuff.

A Oh. *joking* You were stalking me?

B Yeah *laughs* You're great on there.

Silence.

B But you can't say that shit in person.

Silence.

A I'll try to remember.

m

A I thought we were talking.

B We were *not* talking.

A But I thought we were.

B We were *friends*. We were not talking.

Silence.

A Okay.

B Okay.

Silence.

A It's just, when I started following you—

B You followed me?

A Yeah. I thought that would mean we'd be friends.

B We are friends. That doesn't mean anything.

Black.

l

A But I like all of his stuff.

B I don't know what to tell you.

A Why doesn't he like me?

B Maybe—

A Whatever. I don't even like him.



