



# Surgam

The Literary Magazine  
of the Philolexian Society

## A Note from the Editors

If there is one thing I have learned from my years as a Philo, it's the value of a little decorum and a lot of sangria. If there are two things, then the second is that both within the society and the Columbia student body at large, there is a quiet population of fiercely talented writers. We are pleased to present you with the works of just a few. We hope you enjoy, and that you look for our March issue, which will feature the second installment of Amitai Schlair's serialized story and the very best bad poetry from Kilmer 2006.

Caitlin Campbell, on behalf of the editors of *Surgam*

## *Surgam* and the Philolexian Society

*Surgam* is published by the Philolexian Society, Columbia's oldest literary organization, founded in 1802 by associates of Alexander Hamilton.

Philo holds weekly debates, the infamous Annual Joyce Kilmer Memorial Bad Poetry Contest, a celebration of Columbia's legacy of beat poetry, a croquet tea, a Greek-style symposium, and other events open only to full members.

*Surgam* accepts poetry, brief prose, and other original written works.

Please send all works to:

**[surgam@philo.org](mailto:surgam@philo.org)**

# Surgam: Hold fast...

## Works

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Aviana</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
| -Shaun Hanson  |           |
| <b>Hands</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| -Katarzyna Kozanecka                                       |           |
| <b>neck</b>  | <b>6</b>  |
| -Marissa Nicosia   |           |
| <b>We Aim to Please</b>                                    | <b>8</b>  |
| -Sydney Linder   |           |
| <b>Museum Peice</b>  | <b>9</b>  |
| -Anne-Marie Tonyan   |           |
| <b>Sestina 1: Jonah's Wife</b>                             | <b>10</b> |
| -Adam Katz   |           |
| <b><i>From A Journey of Intellectual Enlightenment</i></b> | <b>11</b> |
| <b>in Seven Easy Stages</b>                                |           |
| -Yonah Lemonik   |           |
| <b>Serialized Story: Hooke's Law (part one)</b>            | <b>12</b> |
| -Amitai Schlair  |           |

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**Shaun Hanson:**

**Aviana**

The quantum penumbra of birds,  
white noise blush.

Nest in the overgrowth,  
vines removed,  
Awakens to daylight and emptiness.

Hostility springs up. Primal disturbance,  
he darts, I thrash.

What more can you say about a bathtub  
after finding inside  
a taut feathered body  
impossible to remove?

Postcards and statues depict,  
rabbits and squirrels pad their boundaries,  
but the thing itself is a misdirection.

They are laughing  
until our collective guess  
will pass away.

**Hands:****Katarzyna Kozanecka**

In a bleak house tall to the stars lived a Viking, too long in City pent; the drifting of his curtains was full of long motions. He lived a stone's throw from a river, and knew it not. He arranged Scrabble letters in victory on table after Ukrainian table during a language plateau, nay, a language moor! Oft and again he insisted, that his word existed.

In a bleak house tall to the moon lived a Pole, quick and farfetched; her voice was like a meadowlark; she didn't need to say please to no man for a happy tune. She lived close to the maddening crowd, and knew it well. She bargained in homemade words and borrowed phrases. In this way she did not help the Viking's English.

The Viking, too long in City pent, and the Pole, quick and farfetched, lived at arm's length. She dreamt she found Scrabble letters milling in his pants' pockets; he asked would her dreams please portray him a nobleman and not a thief. They shook hands on it. When he dropped those hands onto her waist as she stood on a balcony without a cigarette in either hand, she called that rattapallax. When they sat round a table in Piter writing postcards to the distant, she called that a whisper. When foam gathered atop coffee, he called that skum. She called it croon, because it rhymed with skum.

She was a veritable vessel of wist for days of old when noblemen gifted entire cities to their beloveds – cities rampant with bridges, blooms, and shoes akin to artifacts. He was a barrel of resolve: that if one said A, one ought to say B; that if one tried, one could find the words to win anyone's love; that in Ikea, one could always find something to desire and afford and fit in hand or pocket.

He was the very champion of logic, whereas she kept time not from the birth of Christ, but from the moment he, of his own accord, lifted her braid out of the way of her backpack in a Lionesque rail station. She knew that if she ever confessed this, he would never again, of his own accord, lift any girl's braid out of the way of her backpack, and the world would fall into a horrid poverty. And it would have nothing, nothing!, to do with the snowball that once fell pointedly, eloquently, into his eye, but she would hold fast to that explanation, for it was compositionally sound.

Floored!, he said. Me too, she said, me too.

That's the word on the street, in the slum of bloom. And the strength of the hills is His also, and some kind of happiness is measured out in miles.

---

\* With all due respect, this piece references such great poets of the English language as Wallace Stevens, John Keats, Charles Dickens, and the Beatles.

Marissa Nicosia:

neck

I

I could write a thousand words about the curve of her neck,  
the craning motions, the way she wraps her hand around and taps her red  
fingernails against the top of her spine.  
But I'll leave that up to you –  
Better about things like that.

II

It rained at the bus stop.  
You paced in circles.  
I stared at the spots the raindrops made on the cement.

The rest of the city was glowing with sunrise,  
but you and I were slowly getting soaked.

III

They were singing a song I didn't know –  
a children's rhyme about April,  
mocking and warping the tune.  
I forced my eyes open and wiped the dripping mascara –  
the only evidence of it in the end.

IV

We say the same things over and over again –  
(the curve of her neck)  
We repeat, borrow –  
(Did you tell me that?)

I tell her stories about you that make her cringe.  
the curve of her neck, the way you held it between your fingers –  
(made her the same promises I'd already made, silently)

## V

I slammed my hand down onto your chest  
and told you how treacherous you were –  
disheveled, startled.

I held my head in my hands –  
Leaving you to look at the curve of my back, the base of my neck.

## VI

She said you were a liar and a heart-eater,  
much like she is, borrowing metaphors.

She wears one earring for each person in trouble –  
They dangle against her jawbone.  
In a month we will bury them in the sand and call it a renaissance.

## VII

You grabbed my neck as a joke.

I wanted to break every single bone in your hand.

## VIII

The curve of her neck is wrapped in a scarf,  
not like it makes a difference anyway –  
you would say it better, make me feel the cold skin.  
Reading your words, the promises written along the curves.

## Sydney Linder: We Aim To Please

(This poem has been edited after the original was deemed unfit to share.)

Born into Brothels on TV.  
Midnight's Children tucked under my skirt on the bus.  
Your round rimless spectacles.

I want to kiss you,  
but I am concerned with prostitution.

I was never in love with my sister;  
She's at Wellesley falling in love with a  
Transgender girl/boy named Jordan.  
I love her for that.

It worked out very badly  
for Chris and Ally.

[Delete? oh! god yes! It's too perverse.]

The hard pink flower between my cheeks  
looks a lot like the  
shriveled grabbing fingertips of children  
playing in dirty water.

Mind. Mind.  
[                                  ah! this too!                                  ]



And the little children in Calcutta can't get out.  
And I love watching my sister fall in love with a tranny.

Rushdie remarried a young attractive lady.

(Apologizes for the several blank spaces, but one must strive to understand.)

**Anne-Marie Tonyan:**  
**Museum Piece**

Curled in a window chair,  
body, skin, ivory breasts  
cold and blank as the eyeless muse  
in a university fountain,  
she waits.  
Spread open, smeared with hot  
damp dust from her carved joints,  
he sleeps.

Now: the sun and Christ Church bells  
warm, shake the air,  
heat cold white  
to blushing, sweating flesh.  
Awake, he finds  
an imitation goddess  
has softened to a girl.  
Stiff, she locates  
watch, dress and train ticket.

Adam Katz:

Sestina 1: Jonah's Wife

I go down every day to the harbor  
To hear the tossed rocks make their music  
As they sail, unconcerned, to the water,  
Cast by the hand of my mother  
Who is without sin, unlike the fish  
She tries to kill as if they were ships

She has always gone to places where there were ships.  
Brought by the loneliness she continues to harbor  
And so, while others come down to fish  
And I come to feel in me her music,  
She comes because, peculiar to my mother,  
Is a need to make amends with the water.

I watch her eyes well up with water  
And the trickles navigate her face as if they were ships  
And I am haunted by my mother  
And why she haunts now this one harbor.  
A cruise line passes, full of idlers and music,  
Its horn distinguishing it from its menu of fish.

She calls like Jonah's wife to the fish  
That pay more mind to the idling water  
And seem to dance to the ship's music,  
Their unconcern hearkening back to before there were ships  
And before there could be felt in the harbor  
The daily, impotent vengeance of my mother.

She has become a fixture here, has my mother,  
Herself just like another idle fish  
Such as often feed the appetites of the harbor  
Whose ever-hungry water  
Now, as before there ever were ships,  
Gobbles up life with the regularity of music.

It must have made such beautiful cold music  
The discovery that brought Jonah's wife, my mother  
To where she now daily worships.  
It must have soothed her oafish,  
Blundering sorrow to see the water  
She imagined to harbor

Her husband. The harbor, the tantalizing music  
Of whose water, though not what my mother  
Sought, let her fish, in her sorrow, for his lost warship.

**Yonah Lemonik:**

*From A Journey of Intellectual Enlightenment in Seven Easy Stages.*

**Stage  $\pi$ : Precision**  
**Digits 641,654 -641,663**

four eight  
two three one  
nine five  
nine six none

now we've learned nothing more -  
about pi -  
than we already knew before

but learning's hard  
and -

four eight  
two three one  
nine five  
nine six none -

precision's very very fun.

**Amitai Schlair:**

**Hooke's Law**

Chavez, the outfielder, wouldn't get the chance to repeat his heroics. In the sixth he had scaled the fence and snowconed one. This time the ball, crushed, wouldn't be hanging around the neighborhood. The stadium, also crushed, silently asphyxiated. With an instinctive grace and fluidity not often mustered since he blew out his knee in college, Jim leaped to his feet and punched the wall directly behind him.

It wasn't the first time. The wall and his right fist were in fact old acquaintances. Considering the decrepitude of the drywall, there were surprisingly few dents and scuff marks. It looked mostly like someone who'd been living there a while occasionally fell into the depressed couch too heavily, bonking the back of his head. That happened too. Jim frequently fell heavily into his couch, and not always under the soberest of circumstances. Just a few weeks before, the new guy at Andy's had sent him home in the middle of a Monday night Giants game. "What the hell?" he had said. "All of a sudden I can't sit here and watch Manning blow another one for us?"

"Not tonight," the new guy had said. "Now calm down and get the fuck outta here."

"Asshole." Jim stumblingly obliged. That night it was his forehead hitting the hardwood floor. Variation on a theme. His headache the next morning had a novel ring to it.

Tonight was one of those nights. Lord knows the Mets had been losing meaningless games for years. This time it was a big one. One punch wasn't enough. His flat eyes now glinting, his right arm had already shot out again before fully reloading. Contact. Same spot. Not as hard as he wanted; but the parched wall, besieged, began to crack. On the third swing his fist came in wide and was met by a stud, knuckles crumbling rather than conquering. Another old acquaintance. He sank to his knees. Air rushed out of his lungs, forming a few coarse words. Gasping, he pulled himself back up to the yellowed couch by his right hand and lay a cold can against his left. Goddamn Cardinals dancing like idiots. They think they're so great? He heaved his left leg in the direction of the screen, vaguely hoping his shoe would fly off and impale it, like in cartoons. Instead, like a pesky sidekick, the shoe patiently stayed attached. He reached for the laces. The can smacked the ground and began whining. He briefly grasped the aglets, howled in pain, and recoiled, striking the back of his head against the wall. Fuck that hurts, thought Jim. The can stopped whining and exploded, cascading beer thinly over the floor. Goddammit, thought Jim. Then he thought of his wall, and of the so-called slugger Beltran, and started to laugh. "At least I didn't strike out looking." To his hot ears his words sounded like shouting. Again laughter, sharp, wound strangely tight. A sob forced itself through, and the laughter cracked, giving way.

\*\*\*

Mrs. Dombrowski was thinking about whether to call the police. Months earlier, sitting at her dining room table with the coupons, she was reaching at her neck for her glasses when she heard, emanating from a point not ten feet in front of her, a focused, thunderous thud. Her hand flew to her chest, breaking the leg of the glasses. Perhaps, if she had been wearing them, she'd have been able to discern a momentary vibration in the living room wall. But she saw nothing. She'd held her glasses up with one hand, dialed 911 with the other. The police brusquely thanked her for the report and said they were very busy. She'd called her son in Chicago. "Can you imagine? Do you think there's a problem with the building? I've been having trouble with the kitchen sink..."

He asked, rhetorically, what she wanted him to do. "Nothing, nothing." She'd taken a few minutes to herself on the sofa, her heart still beating double polka time. Left a note for the landlord, taking the far stairs rather than risk walking past the neighbor for the elevator. After some tea, she had wound some tape, some perfectly good tape, around the break in the left leg of the frame. Later, in the bathroom mirror, she'd spotted a small cut in her chest. After a few more thuds, the police made it clear to Mrs. Dombrowski that she mustn't call anymore. Didn't the police care? If they didn't, who would? The landlord said it was probably nothing to worry about. Probably! She was convinced either a pipe was about to burst or her neighbor was crazy. Which possibility frightened her less, she couldn't say. Maybe it was both! Already she hadn't been sleeping well. Now there weren't enough kindly gentleman television newscasters in the whole world to settle her down. Even if Mr. Allen from across the way came over and helped her tape the ones she couldn't watch until later. She could take or leave Piotr Jennings, but whatever happened to that nice Dan Rather? He had a twinkle in his eye, and so genuine. You could just tell by looking at him he wasn't in it for the fame, he liked people and he had ideals. Oooo, was he cute.

A few weeks ago the cut had finally (mostly) healed. And now, not one thud, not two, not three. Four.

What to do, what to do, what to do? Can't bother Mr. Allen, she thought, I need those tapes he makes for me. Late, mustn't bother the landlord. Can't call the police, they said not to call. "But four times, that's different," Mrs. Dombrowski said, and craned her neck to hear her own wise words wafting back to her. Emboldened by her good judgment, she stared at the wall, planning what she would tell them to keep them from hanging up right away. This time, she would keep them on the line. She enunciated the words once, twice, thrice. They rang true. She slid her glasses back atop the bridge of her nose, took a deep breath, and picked up the phone.



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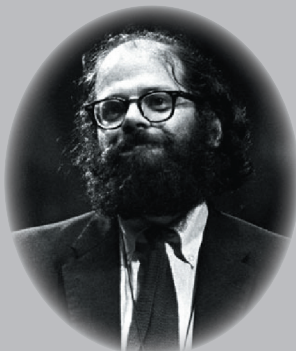
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