

A black and white sketch of a person lying down, possibly asleep, with their head resting on a hand. A coffee cup is on a table in the foreground.

Surgam

The Literary Magazine
of the Philolexian Society

A Note from the Editors

This issue of *Surgam* was compiled spring 2007 with the foreknowledge that most students would not read it until the fall, after I graduate. I ought to impart some of the wisdom accumulated these four years, but nothing really comes to mind. Except this: there is an impulse at Columbia to blanket creative aspirations under fashionable cynicism. Don't fall victim to it, for the sake of readers and editors. My experience here has been enriched by students brave enough to write and to share with *Surgam* their funny, beautiful, and moving works.

Also, try not to lose your mail key, and go easy on the dining hall. There is nothing quite like gaining the freshman fifteen off of food you don't actually like.

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

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Dan Haley:
Camaro

Nick Hammond never understood why his father had bought an Altima. He knew they didn't have enough money for a Cadillac or a BMW, but why an Altima? With its copper tone, the car actually looked like a giant turd. On mornings like this one, when it was raining, the Altima often refused to start. Nick thought it had something to do with the engine, or the car just not being tough enough to handle the rain. When Nick's dad was about to turn the keys for the third time, they both looked over and gave each other the tough guy nod they'd been mimicking since last Thursday's viewing of Butch and Sundance.

"Alright," Steve said, as the whole machine started humming. Nick could feel the passenger seat vibrating underneath his khaki-clad thighs. "I knew the old girl had it in her."

"I wasn't so sure," joked Nick.

"Hey, cut it out, this baby's going to be yours one day."

Nick didn't admit it, but he was flattered. He was still in high school and didn't even have a license. To hear his dad talking about giving him the family car... Nick couldn't help but blush.

"Thanks, Dad," Nick said. "I'll take good care of her."

"You better. This here's a fine piece of machinery when it's not raining."

They pulled out of the community driveway and swung onto the road. Nick looked over at the man behind the wheel: shaggy grey hair and a gut wedged between his body and the dashboard. The armpits of Steve's sky-blue button-down were already a deep navy and his glasses pinched his nose, a size too small for his face. All the same, it was his face, Nick's face that he was seeing. His face 36 years from now, a wife and a family from now, a job and a Nissan Altima away.

"So, how's today look?" asked Nick.

"Well, I've got a meeting with a client at lunch. The guy's a real shithead. He sends me an email telling me that he only wants to pay for 15 seconds of airtime. Of course, we don't sell ads that only last for 15. We go with 30 and 60. So, I write him back and tell him that we can't do it. This guy, however, doesn't leave it at that and emails Rod, asking him the same thing. And this pisses Rod off because he doesn't want to deal with this stuff and he comes in and gives me a talk about how I need to keep my clients in line."

"Maybe you should crack him one at lunch," Nick said. "Just be eating and talking and then pop him right in the face."

"Yeah," Steve said. "I don't think so."

"Well, why not?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," said Steve, looking over at his son and rolling his eyes. "Maybe I could give him the Stone Cold Stunner."

"Wouldn't be the worst idea," said Nick, nodding his head and doing his best to add a hillbilly lilt to his voice.

"So, how're things going with Jennifer?" asked Steve.

"Oh, pretty good. Nothing to complain about."

"Well, that's go--"

"Just last weekend she was taking me to this art show that her picture was in. There was this long ceremony and her parents were all impressed that some councilman was there with his kid. The whole time I just wanted to take a nap."

"That boring, huh?"

"Yeah, I...I mean, it wasn't that bad. It was ok." Nick said, backtracking. He felt it right and manly to complain about his woman (real men didn't gush and coo), but he still couldn't bring himself to admit to being bored at the ceremony. Talking about Jennifer with his dad, telling him that he was bored, suddenly made him feel a little slimy.

"Well, you should have just taken her to a titty bar," his father said.

Nick looked away outside the window and started prodding that cowlick on the crown of his head. "There weren't any around."

Nick knew his father was just kidding, but he didn't like it when anyone kidded him about Jennifer. Not his friends, not his father, not kids that weren't his friends. Nick knew that no one had ever loved anyone the way he loved Jennifer. He knew his dad couldn't understand.

"Sounds like they're really going to go through with it," Nick said. "The war, I mean." They were edging closer to the shore, and with it, to Nick's all boys Catholic high school. Nick felt the acids stewing in his stomach, churning and rising with every Brooklyn block. He adjusted his necktie and tried not to think about Manzini. Maybe he'd get through the day without running into him. Nick tightened his fist and imagined his arm shooting forward, smashing through Manzini's olive face.

"It's a fucking mess," said Steve. "That's what it is."

Nick watched his father shake his head back and forth, causing his jowls to bunch up around the collar. Steve's face had grown tight with the mention of the Iraq War, his lips a flat, tense line. Steve opened his mouth as though he were about to speak and then closed it again, sighing audibly.

"There's no way they're not going to go through with it," Steve said, face relaxed now with a lopsided grin. "They've got the whole army sitting on the border. You don't send that many troops somewhere and then just send them home. It really doesn't even matter what Blix says, the writing's on the wall."

"Well, maybe it should be on the wall," said Nick. "If Saddam's building nukes then why shouldn't we go in and stop him?"

"If. If. The UN doesn't think he's building anything. And why would he use them against us? He's a strongman. Strongmen want to stay in power. Attacking the United States would be the one way to absolutely guarantee his being invaded and thrown out of power."

"Yeah, I guess so," said Nick. "But, I mean, why even take the chance? If we stop him now we're 100% certain he can't hurt us."

"It's going to be a fucking mess, that's why," said Steve. "You're going to be paying for this war for years to come. Social Security, federal loans—all your money's headed to Iraq, Nick."

Nick nodded his head and gave a low whistle. His father didn't rant and rave but always seemed to know what was right. It was in the ease with which he handled a car, never riding the break, always smooth, always even. Nick needed to learn how to drive. He was already 16 and even though they lived in Brooklyn, it was high time.

"Yeah, this...this fucking country," said Nick. "I can't believe we elected this guy. I mean, he only got a 1205 on his SATs and he's the guy we pick to run things? I can't even believe we live here."

"Hey, you like your Playstation 2?" asked Nick's father. "You like that steak you had at Outback last Friday night? This is a great country, Nick. The best in the world. Just thank your lucky stars you're not in Iraq. Things are about to get pretty bad for those people."

"But, I mean, could it actually be worse than under Saddam?"

"They're about to be blown up by Tomahawk missiles or whatever it is we shoot at people," said Steve. "Yeah, it's about to get worse for them."

Nick tried his best to look solemn, frowning, certain he was absorbing the truth about the world. The rain kept washing down the windshield and Nick started mediating on the ebb and flow of things on this planet, the push and pull throughout history, forces that are uncontrollable and relentless, forces, forces... forces like that red car that was on a perpendicular collision course with them as they neared the intersection.

"Dad, look out!" Nick screamed. It was too late to slow down. Nick's father could either swerve to avoid the red Camaro or speed up, hoping to make it through the intersection before the other car got there. Steve gunned the accelerator and the Nissan shot forward. They were more than halfway across, almost in the clear, when the Camaro connected with the rear of the Nissan.

Nick and Steve held on as their car swung sideways, skidding off into a violent drift. When the Nissan finally settled, about twenty feet from the smoking Camaro, Nick looked over at his father. Steve was gasping, having been gut-slammed into the wheel. Nick was hurting too. His shoulder smarted from the dash.

Nick and Steve were still recovering when a stocky man in a short leather jacket emerged from the Camaro. He wobbled a little on his first step but then got his bearings and went around to the front of his vehicle. The hood was wrecked, a pointy mess that resembled something Nick saw that time he went to the Guggenheim. The stocky man registered all this and then started walking in their direction. Steve unlocked his door and started to get out. Nick began to do the same but Steve turned to him.

"Stay in the car," his father said.

"Dad, no, just let me--"

"Stay in the fucking car."

Nick drew his hand away from the door handle and murmured his assent.

"Asshole!" shouted the stocky man. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"I...it was your light, right?" Steve asked.

"You're fucking right it was my light," said the stocky man.

"Jesus, I'm really fucking sorry. Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm doing alright. My car's not too hot though. I don't know if you've seen it. God knows what type of damage you did to the engine."

"I'm sorry. There's no excuse for this," Steve said, reaching into his wallet.

"Oh, you're gonna give me some money? That'd be nice."

"No, I'm looking for my insurance card. They'll take care of this." Steve said.

"Great. Your fucking insurance card. I'll get my money next year and bike to work from now on."

Steve looked up from his wallet. "Just calm down, ok?"

The stocky man stepped forward and shot his meaty arms out, shoving Steve back. The stocky man was glaring at him and Steve put his hands up to placate.

"Let's just keep our coo—"

"Don't you, don't you ever touch my father," said Nick getting out of the car and stopping about ten feet from the stocky man.

"Nick, get back in the car. It's alright." Steve said.

The stocky man turned to look at Nick and chewed his lower lip for a second or two. The hard lines of his face set tighter and then loosened a bit.

"Listen to your father and get the fuck back in the car."

Nick backed away, inching toward the Nissan, keeping his eyes on the two men. He opened the door and slid into the passenger seat. From there he watched the stocky man yell at his dad some more, his dad shaking his head and occasionally flaring up in response to something the stocky man said. Eventually, the stocky man turned away and stalked off back toward the Camaro, dialing a number into his cell phone. Steve was talking into his cell phone too.

Steve opened the driver's side door and climbed in. He looked over at his son and raised his eyebrows, exhaling deeply.

"Are you ok, Dad?" Nick asked.

"Yeah. I'm alright." Steve's whole face was drooping, his shirt-collar dark with sweat. Nick watched him force a grin and sat still while Steve reached over and started tousling his hair. "Don't worry so much. We've called the cops and they're going to come by and do a report."

"That's good," said Nick, looking down into the gearshift.

"You won't even miss school," Steve said, jabbing his finger into Nick's chest and nodding ridiculously. "Not to disappoint you."

Nick thought about the place, all the young men surging through the red tiled hallways, fighting for a seat in the lunchroom, Manzini with his gold cross and that punch that went right through the muscle and stung into the bone.

"Great, Dad."

Anna Sproul:

Commute (After Joyce)

I. Earcanal

Yellow gaze in the tunnel, brighter, closer, brighter, and the noise: cutat-tacut. Cutattacut. Remember the article on the bathroom floor, the Post half-soggy with soapwater: SUBWAY DEAFENS. Oh plug them up, plug them up—birdsong requires ears, and the crickets in the meadow. She wants the keening twilight and a sunset like shook foil—oh Gerard Manley—and Julia's eyes closed in the bluebreeze. CUTATTACUT! Oh plug them up with foam bullets: USA Made, Sleep Better Naturally! The foam expands; foam kisses earwax. Then in the cottony quiet, she is whole. Metalblur. Next stop is a hundred and tenth street, ladies and gentlemen; stand clear of the closing doors. She is not whole: she can hear everything. The crowd presses in, mouth-breathers all. —Oh this could be the last ride of my life, oh take me back to the meadow, I want to be soil. Now Anna: let the baby carriage out first, and the Northface jacket. You are trying to be Christian today. Yes God. Elbow in the back: Yankees cap pushing past, pushing in; nylon and swagger. Oh fuck you, fuck this. She thinks about William Stafford: My name is William Tell. When little oppressions touch me, arrows hidden in my cloak whisper ready, ready. Fingers clasp the metal pole. Grease of a thousand hands, traces of fecal matter, oh nobody washes their hands anymore. Lady. William Stafford died in 1993. Hey, lady. The Star in the Hills. Traveling Through the Dark. LADY! Her skull pivots. Yankee cap. Your bag, lady, it's stabbing into me. What? She pulls the foam out of her ear. Your BAG!

Sorry. She hugs the bag to her, Herve Chapelier, middleclass luxury. Cutat-tacut. Oh, plug it up. Ready, ready.

II. Eyesocket

Young man, hairgel, clench-jaw, cologne: a terrorist in the corner. He has a briefcase. His jawline? Determined. Fingers tighten around the Herve. Oh I am not ready to die. (She will never be ready to die.) Ebola in the briefcase. A bomb in the briefcase. Oh why is everyone so sleepy! We're about to die.

A sideways glance, clench-jawed. Oh he's seen me. Hotcheeks. Look at the floor: shinyboots. She imagines the explosion, the bloodspray, the pat-patter of blooddrops on her forehead. A sneakered leg tumbling through the air. An eyeball whizzing by, licking her cheek. Muffled screams. The long hot tunnel: traveling through the dark. Then we came forth, to see again the stars. Microphones. Lights. Good Morning America. The daughter of our Washington Bureau Chief was in the explosion, and she's with us today. Hello, Anna. Hello Diane. Someone at last.

Ninety-sixth street, this is ninety-sixth street, transfer is available to the number 2 express train. Clop-clop across the platform.

III. Nostril

Finally unsubwayed. She unwedges the earplugs; earwax unglues. Acid urinesmell: this is a city of urinesmells, of yellow streams, doglegs in the air. Down the sidewalk she walks, eyes down. Clop Clop. Two clops among thousands. I thought not death had undone so many. Bright morning, burning bright; cold air snaking in the sinuses. Oh for the meadow, for a bed in the meadow, for the spires dreaming in the distance. Oh for the melancholy air, for the softblue scent of the Cherwell, for ruminant cows on the grass.

Urinesmell stings the nose. Oh plug it up. A tissue, a tissue. She stops, greasy fingers rummaging in the Herve. A gasp, a collision. Hot coffee scalding her arm. Redflesh. Pricklyeyes. FUCK! LADY! THE MIDDLE OF THE SIDEWALK! Hot sweet coffeesteam. Wet arm, wet eyeballs; telltale sniffing. Get it together. Get a napkin in Starbucks, Anna. Get a napkin in Starbucks. Yes God.

IV. Gullet

Venti ice water, please, and a maple muffin. A maple muffin. Also napkins. She wipes at her redflesh, wanting Matt's lower lip on it, dragging across it, cooling, tickling. She thinks of Matt, warm and brown, and England. Do I want what? Milk? No, I—no. Iced water. Not iced coffee. And a maple muffin, yes, thanks. Brownbag crackling: your muffin, miss. Have a nice day.

Counterseat. Window on the world. Unreal city clapping by: clench-jaws in a line. Faces down. Eyebags.

Her mouth opens. She plugs it with the muffin, spongy and brownsweet. Oh take me to the meadow; I want to be soil.

Emilie Ana Rosenblatt:

Madrugada

At five, you walk the pre-dawn street to your bus stop
and shut your eyes how a wildflower folds at night.
Steamship's hornblow over a swaying Harlem River,
stoplights against a no parking sign, a wiry cat
sitting on a toppled news box, dumbstruck at the moon.
Tree-planting your footsteps – a god walking, your weight
left from a different lifetime: a jug full of water, you carry it still.

Ann Marie Tonyan:
The Ritual

They may kill us,
 the American Spirits.

I put away
 my father's letter,
 unread, and light up
 on my front stoop
 watch the traffic.
 Pre-packaged, ultra-light,
 additive-free cigarettes, rolled
 on an Indian reservation.
 I taste him again,
 smell his yellow stains
 on my fingers. The nicotine
 rushes our blood.

Since he retired,
 four or five times a day,
 my father prepares
 to go out back.
 He collects
 humidior, loose, organic,
 additive-free tobacco,
 papers, rolling machine,
 expensive coffee.

He used to say
 Come out.
 I'm having a smoke.
 I used to sit with him,
 on the cushioned
 patio furniture,
 always green,
 help with the crossword
 look for cardinals
 and hummingbirds.

I claimed to dislike
 second-hand smoke
 on principle.

Claire Blatz:
Cycle

In my mind
 your balanced body turns
 and spurns the handlebars
 as we glide down the road
 to the left, alone in the country.
 Oil, potatoes and beer.
 Grey skies, new year.
 Then we're under a bridge
 in the rain with a train overhead
 and a boat floating by,
 with Germany high on the mast.
 Fast, we eat. Quickly, we kiss.
 Graffiti and piss: our companions
 under unglamorous bridges.

We wait out the storm.

Alberto Luperon:

Proof I Have No Courage

I'm standing at the end of the line at Barnes & Noble,
about to buy *Heart of Darkness*
and *The Odyssey*.

A book titled *Gay Haiku* lies on the table next to me.
On its cover, a Samurai-Jack looking guy
tilts a fan in one hand, a paintbrush in his other.
The line moves up.

During the 5th or 6th poem,
a nice old lady asks "are you in line?"

"Yes."

I put the pink booklet back,
face down.

"It's okay," she says, "keep reading."

I walk forward.

"No."

Brian R. George:

On Fauvism

The Fauves were going to trick me with their reds.
And Yellows too.
They referenced Jung and Freud and then became tired.
Then, they closed.
And I closed.
And that was wild.

Amitai Schlair:
Hooke's Law

Synopsis of previous installments (available at www.philo.org):

A wall separates the apartments of Ludwika Dombrowski and Jim Hooke. It often absorbs punches from the latter, who left college when a knee injury ended his baseball career. Mrs. Dombrowski, fearing that the knocks presage an attack, has recently gathered the courage to confront her neighbor.

Something had sent Jim home early, and for once it wasn't the uppity new bartender at Andy's. There was some reason he needed to be home, he remembered that much. The rest he remembered when someone knocked at his door. Must be that lady again. Yup. "Hello, ma'am," he mustered, standing in the doorframe.

Fortified from her Dan Rather viewing session that morning, Mrs. Dombrowski stood as straight as her spine would let her, giving her best approximation of what she understood to be elegance. She had encountered Jim for the first time the night before, finally spurred to action, stealthily armed with her teakettle in case she needed to defend herself (the precise self-defense function of the teakettle was, however, unclear). Jim had been drunk, said it wasn't a good time, closed the door.

"I hope this time is good," Mrs. Dombrowski said with little concern, and went on. "I live next door. Please can you explain me what is the noise."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. It was an accident. Won't happen again," said Jim, vaguely.

She glanced at her feet, as though considering that her accusation might have been not only false but even uncouth. "Yes but also I have heard it before." Her glance shifted upward; he was listening now. "Many times. I have fear. Please."

Jim sighed. What does she want, I already apologized. So what if it wasn't a one-time thing, not like I'm gonna stop doing what I do... Hey, no teakettle this time. What that was about, anyway?

Mrs. Dombrowski waited.

"Uh, do you want to come in?" Jim asked. Nothing better had come to mind. Judging by the angle of her eyebrows, should have kept thinking. "No, no, I guess you wouldn't. Listen..." He trailed off. Shit, man, it's not just about you. When you're trashed, other people have to deal with it.

Mrs. Dombrowski surprised them both by replying, "Come with me." Jim went. She pulled out a chair for him at her dining room table and reheated the warm kettle. It was rare enough making tea for Mr. Allen or her son; strange feeling, having someone else over. "I am Ludwika," she said.

"Jim," said Jim, rising and extending his hand.

"Very nice. How long we live here and not know each other? My husband died a few years ago. I do not work. And you?"

"I'm sorry about your husband." She shook it off. "I teach. High school."

"Oh? You are young. My husband also was a teacher."

"Ah." Chatting up old ladies with dead husbands was not a specialty of Jim's. "Did he like it?"

"Yes, very much. But what he taught to the children he could not explain me. I never understood this baseball."

"He was a baseball coach, huh?"

"Yes, at Ignatius."

Jim rose. "What was his name?"

"Paul Dombrowski."

"He was my coach."

They slowly sat down.

"I played baseball at Ignatius. He was our pitching coach. He was great. Oh my God, you're Coach D's wife."

She was right, her husband would have known how to handle him. Had handled him.

"I'm sorry I didn't make it to the funeral. I know a lot of guys did and I really wanted to, but I was at Stanford, in California. Because of baseball. Because of Coach D."

She motioned him to stop. She breathed. The kettle whistled. She looked at it and at him. He stood up and turned off the heat. "Well, this is something," she exhaled. "This is really something."

Jim nodded and waited, hoping to follow her lead.

"Give truth, tell to me what is the noise."

Bullshitting Coach D had never worked. He realized he'd tried to bullshit Mrs. D and suddenly felt ashamed in a way he hadn't felt for a long time. "I don't know, I just... it's not very smart, I know."

"Yes. Well."

He was looking at his feet as though they contained all the answers. She knew that there was nothing more to be gained by pressing the issue, that this was as much as he was able to say.

"Yesterday I went to the store for bananas. When I was at the store I could not remember bananas. Why did I come to the store? I could not remember about this. I bought grapes and came home. Today I remember bananas."

Jim was at even more of a loss. He tried not to smirk.

"I mean that we cannot always be smart. Sometimes yes. Always no."

"I understand, Mrs. D," said Jim, not entirely rhetorically, and remembered the kettle. "May I pour you some tea?"

She laughed. "Here is smart." She held out her cup. "Listen," she said, "you want to go home now. Okay. Next week you come back please. You can just knock when you are there. Please."

"I'd like that, Mrs. D," said Jim, mostly out of politeness -- but as he said it, the sentiment became true, and he knew that he would come.

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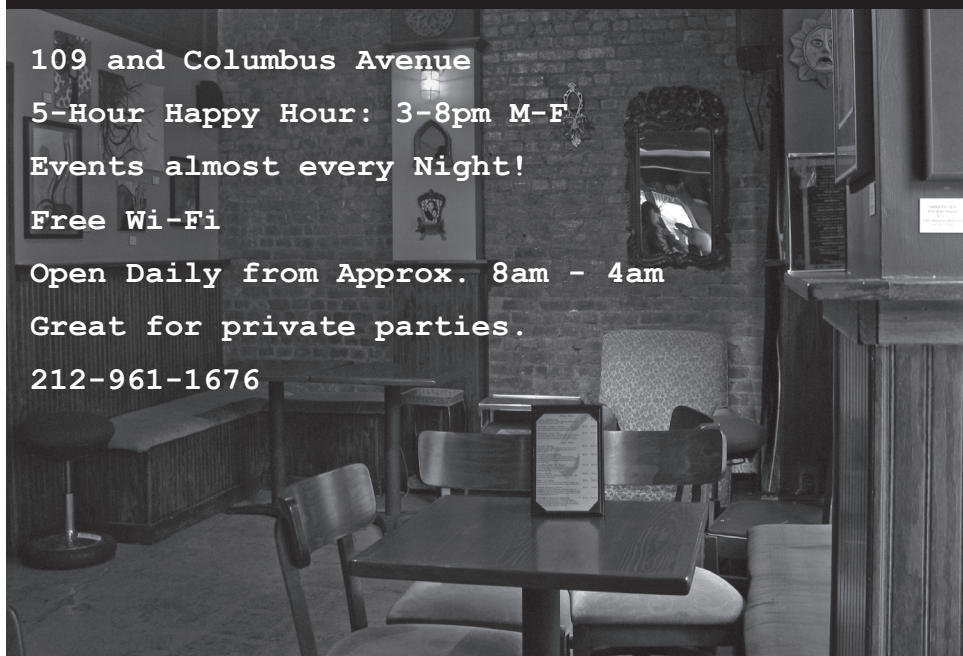
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