



Surgam

The Literary Magazine of
the Philolexian Society

A Note from the Editors

We consider this literary magazine to be one of the most important of all things Philolexian. Not because it allows us to actually call ourselves a literary society, but because we're carrying on 200-year tradition of promoting literary awareness and improving our members in composition. We're proud to put forth some of the most creative works we've seen come out of Columbia this year.

--MS & JF

Spring 2008 Philo Board

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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 Joyce Kilmer Memorial Bad Poetry Contest, Beat Night (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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Broken Feet – Brooke Rosen

Tangled and collapsed in a fractal of body heat-
Rebirth from nothingness encompasses everything.
A cycle of idealism and two broken feet-
Hitting the bottom lets us sing.

Hope is slavery, but by some cataclysm of events I ended up here-
Stuck on this inflection between stale and rushing skies.
It's a blur in a hurry to be insincere-
But we're clawing towards the end of this reoccurring dream.

My thoughts become derivatives of the shadows in your voice,
And twenty six letters turn into seven.

The scent of pine and the notes on our lips...
The collapse of this hallway marks the end of mankind.
Go home yourselves, breathe but don't trip-
There's lace on your smile so I fell into my mind.
You've slipped yourself delicately into each of my thoughts,
My feet are broken—come closer.
We're puppets with epiphanies, hoping they get caught.
Silence is our best composer.

We inhaled.

You buried yourself in last year's Cadence as I lost myself in the
symphony's hello.

Twenty six letters until we exhaled-

Then we swayed and swooned, drunk with the notion of letting go.

Bathe in exuberance, and lose me in your eyes-

Gliding through reality- a dark embrace.

Saturate my religion with rain and fireflies,

Am I really such a mental case?

My world resonates with memories of you,

Transient and feverish from gentle chagrin.

Impulse then psychotic adieu,

Lace your fingers in equations of soft skin.

Sing me a shadow of auburn and velvet-

Guiding my waist through valleys of loss.

Inhale the dust and quiet divine.

And extinguish into ink our twilight song.

The Night Climbers of Manhattan¹ – Samuel Roth

It was December 22nd in Manhattan and it was snowing. Grey clouds, turned orange by city lights, birthed flakes, millions of tiny Athenas emerging fully-formed from the forehead of Zeus. They swirled and flipped, and where the lights shined, they formed pools of particles, suspended in mid-air. There was no illumination, however, on the roofs of the buildings, save for the occasional skylight. Through these, our heroes could see Manhattanites celebrating early a birth whose date they could predict more reliably than Mary herself. The roofs of the brownstones stretched towards the horizon, a sea of overlapping planes, a wave-rocked ocean suspended in time. Our heroes piloted the roofs with agility and ingenuity; they expertly loped over dividers and up ladders; they crossed streets suspended in midair, they did not wait for cars. They saw Harlem, New York University, the stock exchange, and other temples in suspended animation, preserved by the snow. They passed over millions of stories, but did not stop to read them or live in them. Through an unlocked maintenance entrance, they lost themselves in the Public Library, snow falling in sporadic clumps off of his full-length jacket and her scarf in the deepest ends of the labyrinth of books. They paused briefly atop the United Nations and admired the bleakness of the East River. They were not seen, they were not stopped. Rushing south, they watched the river from the tip of the island, sharing in its ponderous grace. From an apartment building on the Upper East Side, they gazed towards midtown

¹ The title is borrowed from *The Night Climbers of Cambridge*, a guide to nighttime ascent of the colleges of Cambridge University.

and over another million stories. They wondered at the other boroughs, swirls of humanity, a million childhoods lived off the grid. At Lincoln Center, which was closed, they heard a janitor play Clare de Lune to a near-empty theater. The notes swirled upwards with the siren of a passing police car, a rejoinder to the descending snow.

Seated on the railing of an apartment building roof, comfortably nestled in the Lower East Side, they spoke.

“We’ve been playing it safe,” he said to her. “Where do we go from here?”

Do you remember our first December? One night, we went to a miniscule off-off-Broadway show in which a friend of yours was performing, just south of Chinatown. After the show—I elide the performance itself in an act of friendly charity—we visited your friend in the dressing room. I want to say that her name was Charisse, but are people really named “Charisse?” You two were talking about something of passing interest, and I was nestled in a chair, too hot in a great coat and sweater and dressing room. I stared at the bare bulbs that ringed the mirror and fell in and out of sleep, visiting lands unknown, millions of fragmentary stories in my subconscious.

I wandered out into the wings of the stage, lost in the dark. Fly ropes and lighting equipment cluttered the floor. I found two lines about the right distance apart and began to climb. Below me, you were narrating something.

Together they soared past the top floors of the skyscrapers, now the peak of the Empire State Building, and the roofs seethed below, no longer able to reach them. Now they began to see the edges of the rivers, now New Jersey and Brooklyn and the Bronx, now the whole island stretched below them, a million Manhattans flowing towards Christmas.

Calendar – Adam Katz

I don't fear my calendars, colorful but used up
Falling off the wall

I don't fear the new calendar
Sent as a promotion of...something
Its twelve new leaves colorful and unused

I don't fear that as the calendars pile up in the corner
I won't be able to open one back up

I won't be able to scratch out the black ex
Change one of the items written underneath it
And cover it back over with black ink

I don't use a calendar

A Heavy Haul – E.M. Weaver

I dip into history,
pulling up its tiny fish
with my glistening net:
Generals, battles, dates-

I heave them all dripping
onto the table,
and, without a glance
for their intricate stripes & patterns,
begin filleting them one by one.

The Astronomer – Jared Rosenfeld

Look, the man in dark painted robes
Who tastes no perfume through his telescopic lens
Whose starry clothing hides the great multitude
Of liver-colored folds around his pasty leg-corners.
Who is he to make my sun
As piacular as a Petri dish?

Ceres – Alyssa Robinson

Ceres lost her right arm in the war
A mine discharged a couple of feet away from her
and a piece shrapnel eloped with her hand
She woke up a couple of days later
in a clean, white bed, staring at the crusty, dark ceiling
Six months in a camp hospital
And the bloody sleeve was replaced with smooth, white bandages
Six months, and she could trace all the black patterns on the ceiling

She was released into the blinding sunlight
with dark patterns still playing before her eyes
She turned back almost immediately,
her arm prickling,
but they turned her away again
She returned everyday for a month
Because she felt as though she had left something behind
Her aborted arm, they said.

Every night she remembered the iron-framed bed and its white sheets
and stroked the smooth remainder of her arm
retracing the ceiling patterns on her skin
Sometimes she dreamed

Either of ceiling tunnels that spiraled into darkness

only to flare into fire, into the inferno of the explosion

Or of a blackness darker than sleep

set to the drip of morphine

In the morning, she washed her arm slowly,

waiting for the water to part for her invisible hand,

Slowly, watching the water stream in little rivulets to the sink

She returned one day, in the heavy heat of summer,

to the place where it happened

Only to find flowers already paying their respects

to her worm-eaten arm

It's been a year, and already it's forgotten, she said.

She hurried away, her fingers reciting their patterns again

She had seen them once, the ones that took her arm

A bloody-eyed fiend stepping out of a charred trench

a glowing cigarette squeezed between its thick, red lips

She had run away, through the cloudy, acid night

to her window, where she watched them multiply and march through the streets,

as the frost twisted into patterns on the glass

She grew quieter as she grew older

In her room,
 there was only ever the scratch of her rough fingers across her raw stump
 in the grooves she had traced before
 And she spent days on end
 lying in bed, staring at the ceiling

Elegy – Amitai Schlair

To seize the day can hardly him console
 For whom, if there be more, they'll fall far short.
 How, numberer of days, of such high court
 Could jurisdiction fall to your control?
 Yet since it has, and since I must abide,
 To judge your judgment shunts my course astray.
 Against some other spirit I'll inveigh
 And in my earthly court shall I preside.

'Tis thus we brazenly make sense of hope,
 Though rather less of hope made out of sense.
 Each neck awaits its moment with your rope;
 Your vise awaits its turn to crush each chest.
 We give no quarter, draw our plans our best,
 And execute them while we have the chance.

Harlem & Chelsea – Emily Hall

I keep two bins:

the one is for paper

the one is for whatever other.

The one that is for paper

has no choice but to be straight

(is the nature of paper, & wood products)

The one that is for other

gets really packed together

because it is made of food, & smells sometimes

I do not want to walk into the next room

and throw my peapods in the other

but it isn't as bad as it would be, if

I threw a peach pit in the paper. So I won't:

I like to think I own this space, & keep things separate.

Melancholy (the man who thought he was made of butter) – Emily Hall

dear friend said to me that
he vomited out of sadness like a hairball
would roll off the tongue of a cat.

he also tries to sleep in bed
(he found himself repeating my name
– it sounded like it wasn't in his head)

(but if that didn't keep him up what did?
his tea was always underbrewed)
he should learn how to replace his lid.

there is a paradox in love and bread, that we make
yeastlike our love from ourselves.
leave that beige dough a while before you bake.

and what happens dear friend if *you* stick in your thumbs?
well if you're wondering, you are more likely to be unsalted.
first if I were you I would turn into who you are.

Things that go bump in the night – Nina Spierer

If I move do you move with me
I sometimes feel your body in the dark
playing with shadows
Looming somewhere in the night
Heavy and tired.
Marks
left on skin
in the shape of parenthesis
leaves the rest of the sentence
unwanted
words kiss lips ever
so
lightly
so
dream
peacefully tonight
so
I can stop looking for you
when
there is no moonlight



Hold fast to the spirit of youth – let years to come do what they may!