fig. 1. the board of the Yale Literary Magazine
Operators’ Note

We are happy to present this semester’s issue of the Lit. Designed as a technical manual, it is meant to offer an approachable guide to our student work. Although the writing was not solicited under any guidelines, the art was prompted to suit the design. All the work in the magazine is by undergraduates and has been selected by our staff in an anonymous process, as it is every semester. In addition to the poetry and fiction that the Lit usually publishes, this issue includes an excerpt from a play.

For our center section, we asked the real questions: Do you watch TV? Have you ever gotten into a fight? What was your first kiss like? Bernard-Henri Lévy likes Charlie Rose. Steven Klein (who directed all of Madonna’s music videos, not to mention Lady Gaga’s Alejandro video) fights fashion people. Mark Strand’s first kiss was his mother. For our interview, we went a little deeper with John Ashbery.

The Lit would like to extend our thanks to all the artists featured in this issue. And to our board of editors and our designer Rachel Kauder Nalebuff: thank you for being the people we would want to hang out with anyway.

Sincerely,
Christine Kuon & Andrew Saviano
Editors-in-Chief
**Before you begin:**

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This year’s Frances Bergen Prize for Poetry was judged by J.D. McClatchy. 
Emily Barton judged the Frances Bergen Prize for Prose
Getting started:

PART A, SECTION I

POETRY

PAGES ......................... 6—16
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I have become the man my mother needed—was it her plan all along?
Memory is unhelpful: I would find her crying halfway up the stairs and comfort her like a child.

When she caught me, two men on a screen, she complained that I was a liar.
I lit candles in the bathroom but she blamed my sister for the wax, hanging the white towels on her door.

Love collapses into triangles, like a beehive at the end of the summer, on guard and bitter.
We have nothing in common, I only have eyes for similarity in others, my father’s eyes.
When she asks if I am seeing anyone it hurts to say anything but no.
1. On the sloped sand behind the quarry, the entomologist prods the traps of ant lions—Arthropoda, Neuroptera, Myrmeleontidae, he says to his students and his sons. All morning, the boys panned for tadpoles, far from the father who knows everything. Fanged, ant lions suck the body, flick away the husk, pit-dwellers, they live without an anus—The sons are running, the youngest laughing, not knowing what it meant.

2. A matter of time, the mother thinks—the boys have not slept. Yesterday, she let them beat trees until midnight—meaning to call them, meaning to rise, she watched from the porch as they drummed at the white screens, set to slant beside the ultraviolet lamps. Always, they cross into the light a little to the left or right of where she traced them, which means, that for a moment, she has lost them. They will circle back, fold wings for the students, withholding and then shouting out the names.

3. The father has written a book, a field guide, elegant morphology. Birds, fish—finished, he likes to say. Twenty-five species of lamprey and a quarter million beetles. Someone must tag the brown moths, measure their asymmetric genitalia. After three years, the ant lion pupates. It grows wings, an excretory system, Malpighian tubes that spin its waste to silk. Flying from the burrow, it congregates, it mates on the tops of hills.

4. It took the boys months to learn a new language. Give me the stick, the entomologist says, the stick, before switching to Spanish. Later, the boys run towards him, shells in their shirts, they say father. Crunched, waste, the shells don’t matter. He has taken his sons to find ant lions. Yes, but—people were here. Some old people. They ate a big dinner, the mother says. She is making it up, but it sounds plausible, important—They loved these shells. They left because they finished, they had to leave because the sun would vanish. They were a scared people. They did not think of many questions, the kinds you boys would ask your father—What thing will happen to our dinner? Will the meat we left be picked by birds?
Outsided
Frenchtown,
Montana
Kate Orazem

The summer I turned twelve we took a ranch
with room to run. You know that it won’t be
a birthday without candles, Mother said,
but Stop-N-Go was out. We ate in the dark,
on the back porch, watching bats make speech to see.
The older you get, the older I feel, she said,
and wiped her mouth, and coughed, and shushed the baby.
The place came with a horse I did not own.
I named her Ariadne. Never came
when I called. She took the saddle because that’s
what she’d been broke to do. I’d ride all day
and come back after dark to find my mother
still sitting where she’d been at eight o’clock,
burping the baby, flipping through a Life
from fifteen years before, or on the phone:
No, we turned off the central air. It’s not
so bad when you get used to it. Well, you know.

I dreamed I stood alone on a tall hill
and saw where all the rivers run to the sea.

We left in August. As we drove away,
I watched the owner forking out some hay
for the horse, and calling, Come, Jack, feed.

Windham,
Vermont
Alice Hodgkins
Winner of the
Frances Bergen
Prize for Poetry

He on one side of the stone wall
I, the other,
Repairing little boulders
As the sun stiffens onto
The rim of the massif,
The season drying up.

Returning by the road, he sees
All the smallest changes:
A stripped dead tree was made into a flagpole,
The woman who keeps
Two pigs has left gourds on her lawn.
We pass a new bench,
His index finger hangs off my belt loop.

The sun is setting
And the road is altered with light.

After dinner,
I cut up wet apples
Shaken from the tree behind
The buried runoff tank,
Just where the brushline is kept.

It is not cold, and we eat off our cedar porch,
The sunlight off the moon passing
Through the cloudquilt.

In a fold of the field,
Two wild turkeys move separately
Below through the quiet evening shadows.
The one ahead twists back,
Clucks, purrs, continues
Toward the tree canopy.
fig. 4. Tectonic study of a waste processing facility, graphite
**Is the tide coming or going?** said a friend.
It matters where we put the fires.
I moved heavy things around—wood logs, cases of beer—with effort. Everybody there was like new to me, stripping down and attacking the water as though born into it. That hollow, noxious smell of lighter fluid, the heady feeling of involvement as I undressed,

_How different people are, and inexact._

In a rush the light came over the water, and people on the beach dropped their arms like empty bottles, keeling over laughing.
All around us bonfires had gone out in little piles, like burnt nests.

I hope I have caught more, despite my egoism and my lack of focus.
The beach ends at a cliff: one friend found a crevice in the wall to settle in, like a wish on folded paper.
In a dark green sweatshirt—the spray like cold fingers—I felt my sense of duty molt.

I have not found, for the others, this kind of harmony.

---

**Nipples, said Elijah**
WHAT?! I said.
He rest his head on my map of Fallujah.

Nipples, he repeated.
God is breasts, forget the rest.
Elijah’s nuts, I tweeted.
Keep in mind:

PART A, SECTION II
SHORT STORY

PAGES......................18—27
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WORDS......................3,328
“For the piano,” the man explained again. His accent might have been South American. He and his companion pressed very close together, the one behind the other, and gave her the impression that they needed more space than their bodies took up. “To fix the, you know. The sound.” He gestured violently towards his ears, then glanced back at the taller man for help.

She had been taken by surprise when the bell rang, because no one really ever rang. The house stood too high on the hill (and perhaps too near the church) for teenagers to bother with mischief, and her friends were never unexpected. “We haven’t called anybody,” she told the men. She knew she hadn’t called them. “We haven’t called anybody and my husband isn’t home. You should come back when we call.”

He wedged his foot in the door as she closed it. “No, you see, the, you…” He kept glancing back at his friend. They were both wearing suits, as though on their way back from a wedding or a cocktail party. The other man (her instinct was to call him “Nordic,” although what did that mean) was better dressed, with a fuller tie and a jacket that outlined his shoulders. She thought maybe she had seen him before in a movie. The shorter man’s hair was wet and parted perfectly down the middle. His jacket, buttoned once, pinned a tie listlessly to his unironed shirt. He seemed too young. The taller man put a hand on his shoulder.

“Your neighbors contacted us.” He spoke deliberately and clearly without any hint of an accent. “They complain because of the way your piano sounds. It is flat.” He reached into his coat and pulled out a thin case. Part of his left shoulder lost some definition. “We have brought these tools with us to change the strings. If you let us come in, we will only stay a short while before departing.” She felt
very vulnerable. He was staring directly into her eyes through the crack in the door, and she had the sensation that her whole body was encased in hard steel that was slowly tightening. Without looking at his hands, he opened the case to display a slender piece of finely polished metal surrounded by lavender silk.

“My neighbors…” she managed to say. “This is unusual.”

“Not at all,” he replied. “Frequently this will happen. It is not at all unusual in our line of work.”

The smaller man had twisted his foot further inside. She looked down at it slowly and vaguely wondered how he could sustain its angle without cracking his ankle. She was a nurse at a small Catholic hospital. “I think it would be better if you came back tomorrow. My husband will be here tomorrow. He is the one who plays the piano.”

“That would not, not be better,” said the shorter man, straining.

She was now leaning fully on the door.

“We are busy tomorrow, you understand,” said the taller man, almost apologetically. “There is another piano tomorrow. This is best. Please. We will tune your piano, and then we will leave so that we can tune a different piano.”

She looked up. He gestured towards the box again. The piano might have been flat. She hadn’t noticed when Jerry played, but perhaps all the strings were altered in precise ratios that had shifted the whole instrument. She supposed this was possible, that the sonatas and études could still sound beautiful and unambiguous yet in fact not be incorrect. If the whole frame of reference was shifted. Maybe the neighbors were aware of things concerning the piano that she was not. That Jerry was not, and thinking it she nearly smiled.

“Thank you,” the shorter man grunted, and when she looked again, the door had already opened into her house. “Thank you for this,” the taller man repeated.

They did not need to ask where the piano was and she followed them into the sunroom. “I don’t play it at all,” she tried to explain.

“My husband hardly touches it. Only on the weekends, when we have guests over.” Sometimes she would sit at the bench after returning home from the hospital, before Jerry got back, and look at the keys. Her hand would run from one end to the other, gently brushing across the tops of the smooth ivory. Or was it ivory? She felt like they couldn’t do that anymore.

The problem was that she didn’t know, not only about the ivory, but also about the instrument itself. In the rare instances when she actually pressed upon the keys, if she ever began to hit more than one or two at a time, she could feel a great chaos of sound massing beneath the notes, threatening to overwhelm the bright room and strike fiercely against her ears. Her fingers would quickly release, the sound dissipating, her heart beginning to slow back down. The piano settled austerely, like a judgment. She would breathe for a moment and look out the window or up into the skylight, where sun would wander in and shadows form only where the wooden frames held up the glass. Depending on what time it was, the angle of the light, the feel of the bench against her legs, she might move her hands, tentatively at first, over the keys, not touching any, and hum a melody gently. Sometimes she would sing aloud. Her favorite songs were hymns she remembered from her youth: Praise the Neverending Light, We Have Come At Last to Rest, O Gracious Blessing Pure and True. On occasion entire words would escape, but mostly, like a patient, buzzing telephone wire, her voice skimmed high and thin through the room.

The singing never lasted for very long; her attention drifted or she had things to do or a motor shut off. She felt that she wanted very much to understand what it was that sat in a corner of her home. But the instrument was a dark, foreboding pond she couldn’t dive into for fear of never hitting bottom.

He was nervous and appeared to be sweating, although she supposed that it could have been the dampness of his hair. “You no, we are begin working, please if you go out…” He trailed off, but this time his partner didn’t say anything, only walked over to the piano and began running his hands over its hard black surface. She saw he was smudging the finish. She wondered if she should say something.

“Need to fixing this, if you could got to, okay, please…” She thought she would and stepped forward. Without warning the taller man’s hand came cracking down on the lid, and the inside of the piano began running his hands over its hard black surface. She saw he was barked, lurching. The action flashed the strength in his shoulders, and that unpredictable power suddenly gave her the sensation that she was very alone. Before the sound inside the piano faded she realized how frightened she had been for the past few minutes. Whatever words she planned to say a moment ago retreated back into her chest. She hadn’t thought he was so strong.

He looked up at her. “We require nothing from you but a glass of water, and that is all that we need of your assistance,” said the tall man neatly. She saw the open window behind them and wondered why it didn’t let in a breeze. The air lay so heavily in the room.

As the sink ran in the kitchen, she heard more bangs, and during the pauses some faint mealy dialogue in a language that, even allowing for the distance, still didn’t sound like English. She looked at the clock. Jerry wouldn’t be home for two hours at least. For the first time in a long time she wished he might return sooner. She thought of the piece of metal in the box that the tall man had provided as explanation in the doorway and supposed it could be used to stab deep into someone’s chest provided the wielder had enough strength. She didn’t consider why she had agreed to give them some water, or if
The Renewal of American Cities: A Flow Chart

The wasteland of the post-industrial American city.  
Artists occupy spaces, endow urban area with bohemian allure.  
Other “creative types” move in, creating an urban vibe that is cutting edge, yet not too much so.

Young urban professionals, seeking to remain hip despite office job.  
Capital finally exists for the destruction of decaying structures, to be replaced with sleek, glass condominiums.

fig. 5. the renewal of american cities, digital print
she had agreed, but it flickered through her that maybe she should try to poison their drinks. She thought about chemicals under the sink but couldn’t imagine any of them dissolving in water, which at that moment seemed very clear, and the transparency of the liquid would ensure that the tuners would know everything she knew almost immediately. There didn’t seem to be any way to surprise them. Briefly it occurred to her to poison herself.

A loud crash reminded her. The water had overflowed onto her hands and pressed the sleeves of her blouse so she dried them on a towel before bringing the glasses back into the sunroom. As she entered the men looked up. They had raised the lid of the piano higher than she’d ever seen it. On the floor next to them the bench had over-turned and sheets of music spilled onto the bright green rug. She recognized the title of one of them: “Allegro in F Major.” A tune began to trickle through her head, staccato notes tripping down a staircase, and as she calmly walked towards the men she tried to connect them to the speckled page, but neither worked.

“This is very kind of you, and your actions have been of great benefit,” the blonde man said, lifting the glasses of water. Her heart was speeding up the melody she was imagining so that it played much faster than normal. “If you would not mind standing back,” he said.

“Step back until there is more space for us.”

“Out the, the room,” explained the other man nervously, “it is a, we.” She didn’t immediately move.

“You’ve knocked the bench over and, excuse me, you’ve knocked the bench over,” she began.

“Not to worry, we can pick it up.” He indicated and the shorter man righted the bench, and more sheets slid to the ground. “You’ve knocked the bench over,” she began.

“This is the tuning! THIS IS THE TUNING!” He spun around. The taller man struck the leg with the metal Y again. And again. 

A high, low deep voice words she had never heard, his voice rising in volume vibrating pitch split the room. The shorter man began chanting in a sinister way, of anatomy charts she had studied in school. There were too many tendons. And the image of a tendon being threaded out of somebody’s wrist came to her now, so his second pull detached the wire from wherever it had been fixed made her clench her fists and tense. She wished Jerry would come home. She tried to think of somebody else but there was no one really.

The man had thrown the wire on the ground. “You won’t need this,” he said. His hand slipped into his coat and it made sense to her that he would bring out another wire to replace the first. Instead he pulled out the box from earlier. He unfastened the clasps (had there been clasps before?) and gently lifted out the metal piece, which looked like a long, thin Y. The shorter man loosened his tie and unbuttoned his jacket. He was sweating more and moved to the corner of the room where he bit his index finger. She watched as the taller man took the metal piece and turned it over before, with the same kind of sudden force he had hit the lid with earlier, he tapped it against the leg of the piano. Many things happened at once. A high vibrating pitch split the room. The shorter man began chanting in a low deep voice words she had never heard, his voice rising in volume as the taller man struck the leg with the metal Y again. And again. And then as he hit the piano he began yelling, “This is the tuning! This is the TUNING! THIS IS THE TUNING!” He spun around. The smaller man sometimes clapped his hands. Both of their faces were very red. She sat and did not move. She thought she might die and prayed to God.

Her prayer had no words but it was a color, a shade of desperate intensity that seeped into her senses. She had prayed with words before and it had worked and it hadn’t worked. “THE TUNING. THIS IS THE TUNING. THIS IS THE TUNING! THIS!” This time was a different situation and she didn’t even realize that she was praying. She felt very helpless, and the helplessness itself was not a plea for assistance but it was there next to the plea, nudging it and confirming it. “TUNING. THIS IS THE TUNING!” It was as though she kept forgetting that she hadn’t already run away. The scene in front of her wasn’t clear enough to
run from, although she knew she thought the men might be danger-
ous. “IS THE” If she had understood her prayer this might have
motivated her to say something, but as it was the tall man suddenly
stopped yelling, turned and threw the metal object as hard as he
could into the chest of his associate. It sunk in several inches and
pinned the tie back to his chest. He looked surprised and sank that
way, with his mouth open, scraping the wall to the floor.

She waited too.

In the pause something crept in, a lack of confidence for the first
time, tipping her presence in the room towards equilibrium. Every-
thing, everything, slowly sagged around her; something had col-
lapsed with the body and she wondered what it was.

The taller man walked to the couch and sat beside her. After
an amount of time he took a white handkerchief out of his breast
pocket and wiped his forehead. She saw the silk had been stained
through and through. He put it away and they sat next to each other
looking at the piano.

The man shifted and tilted the cushion. “I am the best,” he said
then, his shoulders hunched, his suit crumpled. “At this job I am
the best, and I can take a piano. This one at your house has been no
trouble for me and my efforts are now successful.” He stopped and
sighed, and the sound of him exhaling surprised her so much.

When he turned and looked towards her she tried to catch his
eyes but they pushed past. “You understand there are times when
the world expands around you and there is nothing to do but put
your head down and do your job to the best of your own ability. Do
you understand this?” It didn’t occur to her to respond. He turned to
look away again. “My own ability is very, very good.”

In that moment she remembered a day when the subway she rode
to work had taken fifteen minutes longer than it usually did to get
to the hospital. It happened between the third and fourth stops.
She was sitting, swaying with the tracks and looking out at the black-
ness of the tunnel, when it felt to her like they should have been at
the next station. It didn’t come, and she looked at her watch, and
it didn’t come, and she was certain it was taking much longer than
usual. She began to look around, but everyone was reading their
newspapers, or reviewing for an exam, or prepping for an explana-
tory presentation at work, and no one seemed bothered. The station
didn’t come, and she nearly asked the person next to her, who in
tweed and glasses appeared to be a professor. But maybe the train
was moving slower than normal, or there had been an announce-
ment about a detour she had missed, although she guessed it would
not be easy for a subway to take a detour. In any event, she prayed
silently during the jostled, stretched minutes before the platform slid

into view, and when the train came to a halt she stood up to get out
but then sat down again, telling herself she was being silly. The hos-
pital was only four stops away. So she made herself calm and waited
them out. Lips glued together, she sat the long stretches of tunnel
and flashes of station and waited them out.

The remaining man stood finally and walked over to his associate.
He pulled the metal piece out and wiped the blood on the rug before
replacing it in its box and the box in his coat. With some effort he
slung the other man’s limp body over his shoulder, not managing it
at first but finally bracing his leg against a side table.

“Do not worry about compensating us,” he said to her as he moved
to leave. “Your husband has paid us exactly what we requested.”
This time she caught herself praying and stopped. He turned again.
“Your neighbors have paid us exactly what we requested.” He nodded
quickly, as though they had both agreed. But, stepping outside, be-
fore he closed the door behind him, he paused to say more gently, “I
hope, I hope you do not understand.” And then, shifting the weight
of his partner’s body on his shoulder, he was gone.

The house was so quiet it pressed on her ears. She saw the sun
and the blood and the string and the piano, and the composition of
the room struck her balanced and shadowed. At one point she had
wanted Jerry to come home. In the hospital she could tell anyone
how their lungs worked, taking up air and pushing it back out again,
how the diaphragm created a vacuum in your chest that something

The piano sat as if nothing had happened. After an amount of
time she stood up and went over to the bench and sat down. She
didn’t think about singing and stared at the keys. That handkerchief
stained through and through… “I hope, I hope you do not under-
stand.” But she didn’t even need to admit to herself that she did.

After an amount of time a motor shut off. A door opened. Her head
sank and she closed her eyes and knew, in any event, she would
wait it out.
Frequently asked:

PART B, SECTION I

QUESTIONS

PAGES.......................30—34
SUBJECTS.....................13
QUESTIONS...................22
1. What's your drink? I drink a lot of water. But I also drink; when I can afford them, red burgundies.

2. Who do you wish you'd written? I wish I could write like Flaubert.

3. If you could interview any writer who would it be? The late great Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness.

4. How has your writing changed in the past year? I started thinking about the book I was writing.

5. What's your drink? A gin martini, up, one olive, stirred, dry as toast; 6pm; with an oyster. The champagne that comes in the blue plastic bottle is quite possible.


7. What do people think is an influence on your writing? I think so.

8. What other languages do you know? Italian. I could read a newspaper in it. And I know a little Spanish.

9. What book have you read the most times? I don't remember my sixth grade.

10. What are your phobias? Spiders.

11. Tell us about your revision process. The more I revise the more I am fascinated, life is a series of unknown routes.

12. To whom do you write letters? That would be telling, but I do write letters to somebody with whom I am in love.
Getting comfortable:

PART A, SECTION I

PLAY

PAGES.......................36—60
PLAYS.................................1
SCENES..............................1
Characters:
The Strippers
Aphrodite Eliot, who runs The Veggina. Late thirties or early forties. She may be played by a man or a woman.
Candiheart Valentine, a stripper. A little under 30. Skinny, pixieish.
Big Hero Pokacheski, the bouncer. She’s a large-and-in-charge type of woman.
Magnolia, an aspiring actress who strips. She’s 18 and looks it.

Note on the set: The majority of the action takes place in The Veggina, a strip club. At the rear of the stage is a raised platform with a catwalk running downstage at the center, forming a capital ‘T’. At the bottom of the ‘T’ is a stripping pole. The catwalk is lined with a few barstools on either side. On the stage right wall is the entrance and, further upstage, the bar. On the stage left wall are two doors, one to the girls’ dressing room, and another to APHRODITE’s office.
ACT I

Scene I

The lights go up as KASHAWNA, a particularly buxom stripper, is lighting a Virginia Slim. She is wearing a leopard print robe over lime dishabille. Her eyes are fixed on the door to APHRODITE’s office, from which we hear muffled shouting.

BIG HERO, the bouncer, is nearby, watching KASHAWNA nervously. She is dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans and has cropped hair.

KASHAWNA:
Shut your mouth, Big Hero, I don’t need your sass today. I don’t need it.

(Drag)
I never need it but you can be damn sure I don’t need it today.

BIG HERO:
I wasn’t gonna say nothing, K. You think I’m a nag. You think I’m a big naggy dyke.

KASHAWNA:
You think you’re my goddamn mother, Big H. Fuck that. The only mother I ever had tried to sell me to the pederast next door for a bump of crack on Christmas Eve. Fuck Motherhood. That vicious cycle ends with me. I’d sew myself up with my bare hands if I could afford a needle and thread.

(a beat)
I’m sorry. That was rough of me, H. It was vile. I’m on the racks, Big Hero. I’m out to dry. Aphrodite Eliot is arbitrating our fates and fortunes (raising her voice so that APHRODITE can hear) while that anemic New Age bitch is up in her skirt playing the body trumpet like Dizzy Gillespie (back to normal volume). This is a goddamn kangaroo court, Big Hero.

BIG HERO:
Don’t be like that, Kashawna. The Boss isn’t gonna put you on the streets, you know she isn’t. I had a vision. She was holding the scales of justice. White blindfold, too.

KASHAWNA:
Candiheart’s been blowing smoke up her skirt twice a day for two years. The boss is all Juliet for that bitch, Big Hero, and I’m fucked out of luck.

BIG HERO:
Kashawna, will you answer a question for me, please? What would a lesbian Jesus do?

KASHAWNA:
(considers, then)
—Cut a bitch.

BIG HERO:
You know she loves you.

KASHAWNA:
(a long pause. She drags twice on the Slim.)
I know that bitch does.

BIG HERO:
So what are you worried about? Lesbian Jesus would hug it the fuck out. Seek forgiveness!

KASHAWNA:
I’ve hated that bitch for eleven years. We are rent like the curtain of Zion, me and that slut.

BIG HERO:
Once upon a time I worked at a Barbeque place in the Bronx with my ex-husband Paulie. Sexless days then. Just cleaving meat and slathering sauce. Sauce was damn good, too, K. My recipe. Use it on the bean croquettes here.

KASHAWNA:
Hero.

BIG HERO:
Don’t be like that, Kashawna. The Boss isn’t gonna put you on the streets, you know she isn’t. I had a vision. She was holding the scales of justice. White blindfold, too.

KASHAWNA:
I’m familiar, Hero.
BIG HERO:
So I’m looking at Paulie standing there like a dumb beast wanting to go at him with the meat cleaver I was using to chop ribs off the cage. He’s standing there rubbing his moldy tub of a stomach... and suddenly...

KASHAWNA:
Suddenly?

BIG HERO:
A miracle. Pity. I realize he’s a poor beastie little brute. Deformed: missing a rib. Born with a bleu cheese brain. Smartest part of his body was the damn crooked beaver basher hanging out of his peep hole. Couldn’t help it, poor animal.

KASHAWNA:
So what’d you do? Tug him off into your bloody apron?

BIG HERO:
I gave him my wedding ring and a soft pat on the head. I walked out of the freezer, said Adios to Manuel and Julio, And butcher became butch.

Before she can respond, APHRODITE opens the door.

KASHAWNA:
Shit.

KASHAWNA lights another.

BIG HERO:
That’s two in a row.

KASHAWNA:
I swear to God, Big Hero—I’m—

BIG HERO:
I’m just saying your voice don’t need two in a row. Think of your song. That’s all I’m saying.

APHRODITE:
Kashawna.

KASHAWNA:
Should I pack my shit? I don’t suppose I get severance—two bucks for the G-Train so I can go sell myself on Carroll Street?

APHRODITE:
(crisply)
Kashawna, a dancer at my club keeps her dignity even in the face of adverse circumstances, as you well know.

(beat)
Big Hero, take a walk to the kitchen.

With a frightened nod, BIG HERO exits. APHRODITE takes the Slim and puts it out.

APHRODITE:
We’re going to sort this out, Kashawna.

KASHAWNA:
There’s nothing to sort out, Aphie. I’m the third wheel and your bicycle is only built for two.

APHRODITE:
Mixed metaphor. Be nice.

KASHAWNA:
I’m always sugar and spice, baby. Even with these perverse-ass circumstances you’re waxing about.

APHRODITE:
(calling to her office)
Candiheart, come out here please, baby.

(to KASHAWNA)
Nice.

CANDIHEART, a very skinny redhead with a pixie haircut, emerges tepidly from the office.

CANDIHEART:
I don’t want to go near that hooker. She’s going to kill me. She’s a crazy bitch, Aphie.

KASHAWNA:
Girl, it’s something pathological with you. Wipe the mud out of your eyes and face the truth of your Crazy.

CANDIHEART:
Psycho! Arsonist!
6 peg by me
KASHAWNA:
(quickly)
Amateur! Bulimic!

CANDIHEART:

Fucking Libra!

APHRODITE:

Baby—

CANDIHEART:
(cutting him off)
No. This is it.
You know what she did to me.
She set my poetry afire.
(tearing up)
I found it in flames.
WITH A FUCKING CIGARETTE SMOLDERING IN THE FAINT-LETTERED EMBERS OF MY GENIUS!

KASHAWNA:
I didn’t do shit to your shit. I couldn’t give a shit about your shit.

CANDIHEART:
You don’t know shit from Spinoza, you ignorant fuck. It was poetry, and (losing it) NOW IT’S GONE. IT’S SMOKE IN THE UNIVERSE. MY VERSE IS BURNING A HOLE IN THE GODDAMN OZONE LAYER!

KASHAWNA:
(Over)
Ignorant?— it was shit in the first place—damn, girl—the universe? You are one crazy bitch.

APHRODITE:
(ending it)
Shut your goddamn mouths. Now, look— let’s be real. We’re a holy family. You know what I’m talking about: we go back to the last millennium. Four ladies with a stonetablet history grown together, branches twining in the mind and heartroots tangling in deepbody trunks. A troupe of sirens belting through smog and steel and stone singing the ladies a song that melts their earwax, whiffs to the brain, drunk on our music, falling in heaps at the foot of our altar and our patron Saint is the late lovely Miss Rita Lolita and she smiles on us from clouds breaking over the Great Goddess’s navel. Three woman-souls on earth. Three lovestorms. It’s bound to be trying. It’s bound to be emotional. It’s bound to be boundless how bad it gets, how good it gets.

CANDIHEART:
(jumping in)
It’s me or her, Aphrodite.

APHRODITE:
(turning to her slowly)
Excuse me.

CANDIHEART:
This is it, Aphie. No speeches. No compromises. No fucking cajoling. It’s over. Trinity unbegotten. Boundlessness bounded. It’s done.

APHRODITE:
(warning)
You need to think about what you’re saying, Candiheart Valentine, and you need to think about it good.

CANDIHEART:
(standing firm)

KASHAWNA:
(over)
Go fuck yourself, gumdroptits.

CANDIHEART:
—mooing and burning and smoking like an evil—

KASHAWNA:
(over)
Reeses pieces nipples.

CANDIHEART:
--chimney! She is the destroyer and I CAN’T LIVE WITH A DE-STROYER!

APHRODITE:
(softly, as a lover)
Baby, don’t do this. Calm down.
(as a director-therapist)
Green places. Good places. Be the Mover at the Center.
CANDIHEART:
Fuck the Center. It’s me or it’s her. You throw her out or I throw myself out.

APHRODITE:
Baby.

CANDIHEART:
CHOOSE!

APHRODITE:
Throw yourself out then, love. Nobody plays the ultimatum game with me in my Church. Go.

Silence.

CANDIHEART:
You ain’t serious?
(nothing. APHRODITE looks away. Her grief is in that numbing tadpole stage.)
We’ve—three years, Aphie—I know about all the—twelve years, all told—and for three I’ve—we share a bed—lovebody—I know the loversbody things, I know—and your bed is my home. You’re dumping me from the bed to the street without a goddamned private conversation?

APHRODITE:
(over a little)
You threw yourself out, and don’t forget it.

CANDIHEART:
You hit me once. I bled.

APHRODITE:
I guess all we’ll have is pain to remember each other by.

CANDIHEART:
You were not a good person once. I think I liked you better when you weren’t. I think I did. Then Miss Rita died how Miss Rita died and you became the woman—the goddess—you are today. You spent nights howling the gutter, dirtfaced, spitflecked, gravelevating in restitution and you were so goddamn debased that the Piggies learned to pity the Wolf at the Door. You got so low you fell through the ceiling almighty and you felt stirrings of some righteous spirit and two hun-
dred lovenights later you’re throwing me in the street like a bloody tampon after my life burned up and my worked burned up and this bitch is gonna laugh like a vulture tonight and you’re not even going to shed a fucking tear because you never cry you can’t cry you’re a big monster with a strip club and a dream that’s bigger than love. It’s fucked up.

(she has reached the doorway.)
I unlove you.

She slams it shut.
APHRODITE weeps.
BIG HERO enters, and embraces her.

KASHAWNA:
I didn’t burn her poetry. I swear to God, A.E.
(nothing)
I’m sorry.

APHRODITE:
(awakening: she is a businesswoman)
Let me explain to you just how much you’ve fucked me over. How much you’ve fucked this entire institution over. And I am putting my deep grief over the loss of my lover aside, Kashawna. As far as I know, I operate the only all-Vegan, for-lesbian strip club in Brooklyn, maybe even in the whole world. I don’t know. I built the Veggina with my bare fucking hands fronting the money we made doing tricks for men on the streets. I provide respectable, respectful lesbian entertainment. Tasteful, sexy, respectful. I know your buxom male-stinking sweat dens. Was there respect there, Kashawna? Did those horny suits respect your tits the way I respect them?

KASHAWNA:
I like this gig, A.E., you know I do.

APHRODITE:
Respect, Kashawna. R-E-S-P-E-C-T. It would be nice if you had just a little bit for me. Because if you did, Kashawna, Candy Valentine might still be here. Because, maybe—

(she almost loses it, then composes herself)
Maybe if you prized the way I treasure you and Candy and this fucking temple where we’re living dreams and sleeping under a roof, maybe then you wouldn’t have let things get to the push-shove where she walks out the door and takes a whole ocean of me with her. And Kashawna, she was half of my talent. We have a show
tomorrow and half my goddamn talent just vanished because you behave like a goddamn abused Rottweiler and you don’t give an itty-bitty fuck whether we make a buck or have to board up and sail down the river uncertain. Half the talent, half the money: poof. Gone. And for a business lady like me, money is the highest imaginable measure of...

APHRODITE gestures, indicating that KASHAWNA should supply the word.

BIG HERO: (after an awkward pause)
R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

APHRODITE: Thank you, Big Hero. Respect. If you had just a little bit for me, or the customers that support this Church, Kashawna, you wouldn’t have left the ladies just one pair of panties to stuff with George Washingtons. Kashawna, I’m not going to fire you, because you are my brown sugar. But Candy Valentine was my strawberry ice cream. And my customers…they want their strawberry ice cream.

KASHAWNA:
Your strawberry ice cream was stealing my tips.
Your strawberry ice cream was fucking rotten.
And she couldn’t dance for shit.

APHRODITE: Let me be clear, Kashawna. You put me out a good girl, a real moneymaker with the Veggina clientele. If a new dish of ice-cream—a new big-livered, innocent-looking bowl of ice cream doesn’t walk through the door in 48 hours, and I lose the money that the vegan lesbian community is willing to pay for ice cream, then I’m going to walk into my office, put on my gloves, reach into my desk, pull out my glock, and put an 18-mm cap in your fucking ass. Do you understand me, Kashawna?

(pause)

KASHAWNA: (softly)
Yeah, sure, A.E., I get you.

APHRODITE: Go get your costume on.

KASHAWNA exits SL.

BIG HERO: That was rough, A.E. Why you gotta be so rough?

APHRODITE: Because this is my house, Big Hero, this is my little house of big, wet love. And I’m in charge. You put a lot of love under a little roof and if you don’t keep your gun loaded, finger on the trigger, if you don’t have everybody’s balls, so to speak, under your boots, this shit will explode, supernova-style. And then there would be no big love. No big love, Big Hero, no little house. I’m not about to lose my house, Big Hero. I play for keeps.

BIG HERO: Ain’t terribly lady-like, A.E., treating your girls so rough.

APHRODITE: I’m not lady-like enough for you, Big Hero? Am I not delicate enough for you? Should I have voiced my grievance with Kashawna on some other door, hope she reads it? A lady don’t get her hands dirty so sometimes you gotta drop your frills and be a force. I speak softly and carry an iron pussy. And if you don’t like it, you can take your fat ass to a nunnery, and stay there.

(pause)

You’re such a Victorian sometimes, Big Hero.

A.E. exits. KASHAWNA re-enters, and crosses to the bar. She is dressed as Wonder Woman and carries a pair of big golden handcuffs.

KASHAWNA: She give it to you, too? Who the fuck does she think she is, bestriding my ass like a colossus? Bullshit.

BIG HERO: She’s just pissed about Candy, K, she’ll get over it.

KASHAWNA: No, she won’t. She doesn’t know how to forget. She absorbs it all like hot obsidian cooling hard over every moment of her life. She’ll rage to the grave.
BIG HERO:
Yeah, sure, K., but volcanoes can’t erupt for that long. (reconsidering) Unless they keep erupting and erupting and causing earthquakes that then make them keep erupting. (a beat) She loves you, K., you know she loves you. You’re the star, K. Candy Valentine was just a wash.

KASHAWNA:
Did you see the way she threw Candy out? Bitch barely shed a tear before it was Strip Club Shylock and my dolla-bills, my daughter, my dolla-bills. We’re just a pair of panties brimming green—that’s all we are to her.

BIG HERO:
That ain’t true.

KASHAWNA:
You didn’t know the bad egg that came before the righteous chicken, Big Hero. I knew her before she built the Church. I knew her before the pride: I knew the fall.

BIG HERO:
(whispering)
Don’t talk about that, K.—you know we can’t talk about that. That’s nothing. That doesn’t exist, what you’re talking about. I don’t even know what kind of nothing you’re not supposed to be talking about.

KASHAWNA:
Aphrodite Eliot can do a lot but she can’t make a girl forget. But she knows she’ll face judgment. A shining sword on a beautiful day, Big Hero: it’ll swing down on her. Thump.

BIG HERO:
I ain’t gonna talk about this.
You gotta rehearse. You gotta be real good tomorrow; you gotta make good money or I don’t wanna know what she’ll do.

BIG HERO sits at the piano and starts the vamp.

KASHAWNA gets onto her knees and puts her hands behind, wrapped around the stripping pole.

KASHAWNA:
Can you help me out with these cuffs?

BIG HERO reaches over the stage and clasps the handcuffs shut.

BIG HERO:
(resuming the vamp)
One, two, three, four—

APHRODITE enters to watch.

KASHAWNA:
(bound to the pole, she moans a few times, and then begins to sing some variation of these lyrics)

Oh...
Oooohhh...
Do you ever lie awake and wonder,
Did you ever think you’d get to see
What Wonder Woman’s wearing under
’Neath her golden brasserie?

(slithering up the pole)

Wonder no more:
But wonder at these—
(she does a dance wherein the brasserie comes off without her removing the handcuffs; she is left in patriotic negligee or a bikini)

You found me, you bound me, you swallowed the key,
This Amazon woman’s in captivity
and she is bursting, she’s about to pop,
Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop,
She don’t want no Superman to come and ruin all the fun, so...

(fierce belting now)

KASHAWNA bursts free, pulling the handcuffs apart with her strength.

A dance follows, a mad burlesque, with BIG HERO banging away on the keyboard.

While KASHAWNA is performing, MAGNOLIA enters and stands by the bar, watching. A soft angelic blue spotlight lights her, answering APHRODITE’s prayer. She is wearing a backpack and a large flannel shirt. She is not yet 19. It doesn’t seem that she’s ever been to strip club before, and the energy of the performance seems dangerous (but exciting!) to her.

APHRODITE:
Give it a little more on the last “don’t stop.” Maybe take that one up an octave.
SWOON
KASHAWNA: (taking it up an octave)
Don’t stop!

APHRODITE:
Very nice.

BIG HERO:
(noticing MAGNOLIA)
Hey, boss, an angel just fell from the heavens! (a bit goo-goo) Purdy little angel.

APHRODITE:
(cue Cupid)
Welcome to the Church, wayward lamb. What brings you to my doorstep? I think I know.

MAGNOLIA:
The music.
(to KASHAWNA)
I heard you singing from the street. It was fascinating. You were bewitching.

APHRODITE:
I’m Aphrodite Eliot. Owner, choreographer, sometime performer. ‘Aphrodite’ for the goddess of sex.

KASHAWNA:
Love. Not sex. Love.

APHRODITE:
(ending debate on the matter)
SEX. And Eliot for George. He was a woman. And who are you?

MAGNOLIA:
Magnolia.

APHRODITE:
What’s your real name?

MAGNOLIA:
People call me Maggie.
APHRODITE: Magnolia. So where are you from, angel? Heaven? Hell?

MAGNOLIA: South of here. My daddy used to do business in Mississippi and Magnolia grandiflora was my momma’s favorite tree but she died when I was born so my daddy stayed around long enough to name me and then did a Hemingway with a rifle and some scotch whiskey.

APHRODITE: Oh, baby—

MAGNOLIA: I don’t need you to take ruth, Miss Eliot. These are just the naked ABCs of my history. Grandma raised me on Staten Island until she fell off her bed and died last week but she had dementia so I don’t miss her soul or anything. I got $500 trading in her wheelchair—one of those electric ones—so I’ve been staying at the YWCA in Cyprus Hills till I can get a job. You don’t happen to need a waitress do you? I’m good with people, even rude ones.

APHRODITE: How old are you, orphan Maggie?

MAGNOLIA: 18.

KASHAWNA: That’s the magic number.

BIG HERO: Kashawna, we ain’t got to be vulgar.

APHRODITE: (to MAGNOLIA) Baby, the Veggina is a fledging enterprise—we’re new on this scene and right now service is very intimate. We’re building a clientele. Women don’t know we’re here yet, women don’t know what we’re offering them—a safe and respectful house of light sin and ethical bar food. One day we’ll have waitresses, I’m sure, but right now, we’re just three ladies sashaying towards a gay utopia.

MAGNOLIA: Oh, I understand, Miss Elliot. Times are tough, I know, for everyone.

KASHAWNA: Yeah, bitch tried to put loose change in my vajayjay last week. Pennies! Can you believe that shit?

BIG HERO: Fucking economy.

MAGNOLIA: (starting to leave) It’s too bad for me, though. This is a real homefeeling place you girls have. It stirs me right up.

APHRODITE: (suddenly) Baby bird, can you sing?

MAGNOLIA: (turning back) I’m an alto.

APHRODITE: Give us a song, will you?

KASHAWNA: You’ve got to be joking, A.E. This Bambi? In our club?

MAGNOLIA: What are you saying?

KASHAWNA: Honey, this is a meat-market. We are the commodities. What are your assets? What are the ladies going to sink their teeth into? You’re a slice of prosciutto, little thing—I don’t mean to offend—and our customers are looking for a Porterhouse. You know: both the strip and the filet.

APHRODITE: Kashawna Delores, shut your profane mouth. You just shut it right up or I’ll do it for you with my Swingline. This is a goddamn temple. No meat, no market, no assets, no men: you’re wrong. Girls come here to worship at your altar and this is how you talk about what we’re doing here? I’d like to think you’d have a little more gratitude in your attitude, K. (pulling out some dollar bills) This is the incense the honeys burn for you. This place is about the need to venerate. Love on a pedestal. (throwing the money in her face) These are
Hosannah Hosannahs and if you don’t appreciate that I’m afraid you haven’t learned a wretched thing from me.

KASHAWNA:
(muttering)
You contradict yourself.

APHRODITE:
(explooding)
I contain multitudes! Deal with it!
(turning to MAGNOLIA)
Honey bunches, come dance for me.

MAGNOLIA:
What do you mean?

APHRODITE:
This is a job offer, sweet cheeks. Audition for me. We’re one stripper down and I think you walking in the door was something providential. Come, dance.

MAGNOLIA:
You want me to take off my clothes?

APHRODITE:
That’s the business we’re in. Think of it as a liberation. It’s a celebration of you.

MAGNOLIA:
(re: BIG HERO and KASHAWNA)
In front of these people?

APHRODITE:
Well, yes.

MAGNOLIA:
I want to be an actress, Miss Elliot. It’s my real true dream.

APHRODITE:
Well, honey, this church is a stage! Get up there, bare your soul for me now.

Tentatively, MAGNOLIA climbs up on the stage. APHRODITE gestures for BIG HERO to sit down at the piano, and takes a seat at one of the bar stools lining the stage. BIG HERO begins to play slowly...
(to MAGNOLIA)
Put your shirt on.

MAGNOLIA quickly buttons up her shirt.

APHRODITE:
That was...well, you were real good, baby. Natural as honey. Thank you.

APHRODITE turns away from the stage, scratching a table with her nails, checking her hair and tapping her foot.

MAGNOLIA:
Can I climb down?

APHRODITE:
(not looking at her)
Of course, of course, honey. Big Hero, why don’t you make Maggie a Shirley Temple?

BIG HERO does.

MAGNOLIA:
Can I ask you a question?

APHRODITE:
Yes, baby.

MAGNOLIA:
Do boys come here?

APHRODITE:
Never.

KASHAWNA:
Just the occasional queen.

BIG HERO:
No straight men allowed.

APHRODITE:
(turning to face her)
That’s the truly amazing thing about the Church, baby. No fucking men. It’s the Veggina promise.

MAGNOLIA:
Does that mean...

APHRODITE:
Go get your stuff from the Y, Magnolia. There are bedrooms upstairs and one of them is yours if you want it. You’re half the talent, if you want to be.

KASHAWNA:
Hell no, Aphrodite, you can’t be serious. She don’t even strip; she just takes off her fucking clothes like she’s about to hop into a god-damned bathtub. She got no bootie, no titties, no attitude, no assets.

APHRODITE:
(warning)
Kashawna, I will dump your ass on the streets right now. You want to try to find another gig in this economy? Stripper faces a 20% unemployment rate right now. That’s one in five. So just shut your fucking pie-hole and welcome Magnolia to the illustrious, elite group of fine fucking foxes that are the Veggina Girls.

MAGNOLIA:
I got the job?

APHRODITE:
Yes, honey. Welcome.

MAGNOLIA runs to APHRODITE and hugs her. KASHAWNA leers.

MAGNOLIA:
I won’t disappoint you.

APHRODITE:
I know you won’t. I know you got it.

KASHAWNA:
(acidly)
Oh, she got it?

APHRODITE:
(crisply)
Kashawna, I want to hear you welcome Magnolia.

KASHAWNA bites her tongue.
APHRODITE:
Five. Four.

KASHAWNA:
Come on, A.E.

APHRODITE:
Three.

BIG HERO:
Do it, Kashawna, come on. Don’t be like this—

APHRODITE:
Two.
A brief pause.

KASHAWNA:
Welcome to the best fucking strip club in this city, kid.

APHRODITE smiles.

KASHAWNA:
But lemme say this, freckles; this is the big leagues. Big league, big tits. You’re a rookie; I’m the MVP. Don’t forget it. (beat) So Willkom-

men.

APHRODITE:
Teach her Candiheart’s steps.

KASHAWNA:
You want me to teach her?

APHRODITE:
You two getting the fuck along is what I want, K. Can you do that for me? Can you try? Don’t pierce my heart again. I couldn’t survive.

APHRODITE exits.
Lights out.

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Wrapping up:

PART B, SECTION II

QUESTIONS

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INTERVIEW WITH JOHN ASHBERY
with Orlando Hernández and Christine Kwon

We interviewed Mr. Ashbery in his Chelsea apartment, which he shares with his partner
David Kermani. The apartment had many rugs. There were also extensive collections of
records, CDs, books, and art on the walls.

LIT: As an undergraduate, you were published in the Harvard Advocate. At the time,
the editors were Robert Bly, Donald Hall, and Kenneth Koch. Did these early editors
of your work impact your writing?

ASHBERY: Kenneth Koch was actually the first poet I ever became friends with. I
grew up in a publishing family, and I went to the office to submit some material for consideration and I met him there.
We immediately hit it off. We began showing our poems to each other, almost on a
daily basis.

LIT: How do you feel now about your undergraduate writing?

ASHBERY: There’s some of it I still like that seems to bear a resemblance to what
I’m writing now, or what I have written in the recent past. Obviously that’s not very
much of it. But I can see some kind of fingerprint that I left on my past poetry.

LIT: You overlapped at Harvard with Frank O’Hara as well.

ASHBERY: Unfortunately, I didn’t meet O’Hara until about a month before I gradu-
ated. I knew who he was—he had published stories and poems in the Advocate
and I saw him on the street—but I never had the courage to speak to him because
he looked rather tough. He had a broken nose that made him look sort of like a
pugilist—he looked like somebody who didn’t encourage fools. He did, it turned
out.

When I finally met him, we immediately started conversing as if we’d always known
each other, and for the month that I still had at Harvard, we saw each other almost
every day. He was just a wonderful person to be with, and many people can testify
to this. Later, when we came to New York, he was always the center of a circle of
admiring writers. He was impossible to be alone with because he had always invited
six other people. We were all jealous of each other. He had an incredible magnetism
and charm.

LIT: So, what did you do after graduating from Harvard?

ASHBERY: First I got an M.A. in English from Columbia. Then I went to Paris.

LIT: Why Paris?

ASHBERY: Why not? Doesn’t everyone want to go to Paris? After I got my M.A.
(which I really just did so my parents would support me for a couple of more
years), I got a job in publishing. I worked at Oxford University Press and McGraw
Hill for about seven years. And then I happened to get a Fulbright—I applied for a
Fulbright to France and was turned down initially. I was put on the waiting list.
Hill for about seven years. And then I happened to get a Fulbright—I applied for a

LIT: It seems like your poems end when they have spent themselves. Is that how you
think of your poems?

ASHBERY: No, I have absolutely no idea. And that’s the way I like it.

LIT: What do you think of your early work?

ASHBERY: Which I really just did so my parents would support me for a couple of more
years. I thought it was going to be a job in publishing. I worked at Oxford University
Press and McGraw Hill for about seven years. And then I happened to get a Fulbright—I
applied for a Fulbright to France and was turned down initially. I was put on the waiting list.
Hill for about seven years. And then I happened to get a Fulbright—I applied for a
Fulbright to France and was turned down initially. I was put on the waiting list.
At the same time, I sent my first book to Yale University Press. And it was turned
by the Press. Later on, Auden, who hadn’t chosen anything from what they
had sent him, heard that I submitted and asked to see it. In other words, this was
my year of almost not winning things. Three months before the Fulbright was to
begin, they said I could have a Fulbright if I wanted. I needed a job. I was writing
advertising copy and press releases for college textbooks.

LIT: You explored all the English major options after college: publishing, graduate
school. Paris. You’ve published over 30 books now. What is your process of putting
together a book? Do the poems in a book often cohere to a theme you have in mind?

ASHBERY: I just write and accumulate poems, and then when it seems like there
are enough for a book, I dig them out and look at them again. I look at them, correct them, right after I’ve written them, then don’t look at them for a long
time, maybe a year or more. When I feel there are enough to make a book, or I
want to send some out to magazines, I will then look at them and correct them
a little more maybe, but usually not very much.

People are sort of confused by the fact that the poems are alphabetized in Can You
Hear, Bird and Planisphere—as though this meant something, but it really didn’t.
I just had them that way to keep track of them. And when I looked at them, that
order seemed to be fine. Other times, I might just throw them on the stairway.
They don’t have any other organic structure as a book, except for whatever seems
right at the time.

LIT: Can you tell us a bit more about your revision process?

ASHBERY: It’s usually quite minimal. When I was starting out writing poetry, I
revised endlessly, would work weeks on a little poem—I think “Le livre est sur la
table” was one of those. And since I hate revising, I hate the extra work, I want to
got back to sitting around [chuckles]—I must have schooled myself somehow, to
not write anything requiring a great deal of revision. Now, in fact, I sometimes have
almost no corrections at all. Recently, the journal of the Academy of American Poets,
which reprints a manuscript of a poem in every issue, asked me for one, and I
sent them one which actually only had two words, I think, that were corrected.
That’s sort of as interesting as something that has a lot of corrections in it.

LIT: It’s refreshing to hear a poet say that he doesn’t really revise. Most writing pro-
fessors we’ve had really believe in revision.

ASHBERY: I know, I’m always asked that in colleges by students for that very rea-
son. Their professors are after them—and of course, I did it when I was a student
myself. I think you have to start out that way, at least. Although I know some
poets of my generation who are still revising heavily and steadily: I know James
Merrill, for instance, loved the process of revising. When he had finished a poem, he
was delighted: Now I have all this stuff to revise!

LIT: Would you say your impulse to write a poem is linguistic or more emotional?

ASHBERY: I think it’s, as you say, linguistic. The words start shuffling around in
my mind, and I start to write, and then the emotional and everything else comes
along with it.

LIT: So don’t you necessarily know where the poem is going when you start?

ASHBERY: No, I have absolutely no idea. And that’s the way I like it.

LIT: It seems like your poems end when they have spent themselves. Is that how you
feel about them—when they’re done, you know it?

ASHBERY: Yes, that’s true. I’ve often said that when I’ve finished a poem, a kind
of timer goes off, meaning that it’s finished. Then if I try to cheat and rewrite after that, it’s never any good.

LIT: You’ve said that you don’t consider yourself an autobiographical poet. Is there a
reason you don’t explore your personal relationships as often as other poets do?

ASHBERY: Because I don’t write that kind of poetry. Although I certainly don’t feel
that I can’t talk about things like that in my poems. I hate the idea that there’s
subject matter that you shouldn’t or can’t use. I do talk about my mother. And
my father. In fact, I even have one quite autobiographical poem. It’s a short poem,
fairly recent. I’m always trying to think of something I haven’t done yet—and I
guess one day I thought, Hey, I haven’t written an autobiographical poem. So I
quickly wrote a poem called “The History of My Life.” It has the line, “There was I:

ASHBERY: Why not? Doesn’t everyone want to go to Paris? After I got my M.A.
(which I really just did so my parents would support me for a couple of more
years), I got a job in publishing. I worked at Oxford University Press and McGraw
Hill for about seven years. And then I happened to get a Fulbright—I applied for a
Fulbright to France and was turned down initially. I was put on the waiting list.
At the same time, I sent my first book to Yale University Press. And it was turned
down by the Press. Later on, Auden, who hadn’t chosen anything from what they
had sent him, heard that I submitted and asked to see it. In other words, this was
my year of almost not winning things. Three months before the Fulbright was to
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begin, they said I could have a Fulbright if I wanted. I needed a job. I was writing
advertising copy and press releases for college textbooks.
ASHBERY: I guess one would expect it to be, “to make of us what they could,” and of us what we could.”

LIT: We were also wondering about the ending of your poem “Street Musicians”: “Our trash, sperm and excrement everywhere, smeared / On the landscape, to make it outside; they all seem to be part of one chain.”

ASHBERY: A lot of the material that Darger used was stuff that I read when I was a child—and also comic strips—so they had an extra resonance for me, just because I remember their original states.

LIT: There are many “floating pronouns” in your poems. How much do you think about the people and things behind the pronouns? Or is it a kind of linguistic play?

ASHBERY: I’ve become sort of notorious for “floating” pronouns, though I think that much poetry is written that way. Not just me trying to annoy somebody. I think it’s that I don’t have a very strong sense of who I am as opposed to you and it outside; they all seem to be part of one chain.

LIT: That’s kind of the opposite of solipsism.

ASHBERY: I think so. That’s the only way I can explain it. And also, it seems as though “it” is often a word that doesn’t need any further explanation. It’s like—well, in art, for instance, negative space in sculpture—it’s not there, but it’s very much there.

LIT: In “Le livre est sur la table,” the table can be seen as a figure for the concrete, and the book a figure for the abstract or the imagined—do you think about this division when you write?

ASHBERY: The title is, of course, something that would be in a French grammar book. I suppose the line “The table supports the book” is a kind of key to what the poem is about. The table wasn’t built to support the book, but it is now supporting it, in the same way that one carries books within one.

LIT: To elaborate on nothing being off-limits in your poetry—your poems include references that span literature, art, and popular culture. Do you like mixing up the highbrow with the lowbrow?

ASHBERY: Yeah, I like mashing everything together. Mélange adulte de tout: the adulterous melange of everything.

LIT: Your book Girls on the Run, which is one long poem, references collage. It’s loosely based on the work of Henry Darger, a janitor who made an illustrated novel about some little girls. And Mr. Kermani just showed us some of your most recent collages. How would you compare the process of collage making to poetry writing?

ASHBERY: A lot of the material that Darger used was stuff that I read when I was a child—and also comic strips—so they had an extra resonance for me, just because I remember their original states. I don’t remember exactly why I began doing collages but I was always interested in contemporary art, even as a child. There was a big show of surrealist art at the Museum of Modern Art in the 30s, which I read about in LIFE magazine. Collages were a part of that. I knew that they were a contemporary means of expression. Everything is collage, really. It began in the early twentieth century: putting something there and maybe putting something up there to see how they go together. That seems to be the way modern art gets done, even when it’s not actually collage. And poetry—some poetry—as well.

It reminds me of the definition of poetry in Lautréamont’s préface to Poetry, which is: the unexpected encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table. Which sounds just like a Max Ernst collage.

LIT: You’ve lived in New York City for many decades now, although you grew up on a farm. Do you consider yourself a nature man?

ASHBERY: Yes. But I wasn’t initially, probably not until my mid-twenties: I mostly heard his “barbaric yawp.” Or like someone said, his poetry’s like a river that’s a mile wide and an inch deep. Then I really got him at some point, for my own purposes. The music of his language, which is not at all what you expect it’s going to be, works on a much subtler level, I think. It has a kind of inventiveness that’s sort of at odds with his embracing of the world “à la Walt Whitman.” There are mechanisms in his poetry I would like to track down and use for myself.

And then, of course, I wrote a long poem “The Skaters,” interested in seeing if I could do long lines like that. I did that earlier, actually, in my early poem “The Instruction Manual,” that was very much when I first began reading Whitman.

LIT: What other writers have influenced you?

ASHBERY: I still like Auden, his early work, though, not his later work. Harold Bloom refuses to take that seriously: [in Harold Bloom’s voice] My dear boy…You can’t seriously say you’re influenced by Auden. It’s Stevens. Not Auden. And of course, I was also influenced by Stevens.

LIT: How did you and Harold Bloom meet?

ASHBERY: My publisher sent him one of my books for a blurb. I think it was Three Poems, and he wrote this incredibly generous blurb. When we met, I think he then invited me to read at Yale. And of course, I have several times over the years there, thanks usually to his auspices. I haven’t seen him much recently; I don’t go to New Haven very often. The last time I saw him was in New York about a year ago; he has an apartment here. David and I went over to have tea with him and Jeanne.

LIT: You and W. S. Merwin were both born in 1927 and have had lasting, fruitful careers. How do you feel about Mr. Merwin and his work?

ASHBERY: I’ll address that in a moment. But you reminded me of something a student said to me once, at Brooklyn College—I had to give a genre course in poetry, for students who presumably had never read a single poem. I was going mad trying to figure out how to do that. I found an anthology of rock lyrics as poetry—like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. But they were sort of bored and the anthology was slightly out of date anyway and they hadn’t heard of some of the people in it. I had to explain to them who they were. So one day, I got fed up and said, You have a poem “Sunday Morning” by Wallace Stevens in your other anthology so read that and be prepared to discuss it next time. So this one kind of nerdy kid—the kind that always waits for you after class—in my case, it was a double threat out there because they all knew I was taking the subway back to Manhattan. They were taking the subway, too. He was like, Gee, Professor Ashbery, I really like that poem you made us read. So much better than that shit you’ve been assigning. Next time, I assigned a poem by Elizabeth Bishop. I think it was “The Fish.” And the same kid came up afterwards and was like, I really like that one too, professor. I’m a nature buff myself.

So to answer your question, yes I’m a nature buff. But I grew up on a farm and didn’t really like it then. And I had lived with my grandparents in the city of Rochester when I was a small child; I always felt deprived of city life and society and kids around while I was growing up on the farm. Although there’s a lot of nature in my poetry, it’s often connected with anxiety, I think, for that reason.

ASHBERY: We’re certainly friends. Again, you asked me about other poets such as Donald Hall and Bly, but we all live in different places. Merwin has lived in Maui lately when he was a small child; I always felt deprived of city life and society and kids around while I was growing up on the farm. Although there’s a lot of nature in my poetry, it’s often connected with anxiety, I think, for that reason.

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for many years. He used to keep a place in New York, a kind of cold water flat. But whenever I see him, we’re extremely cordial and I’m very fond of him. I didn’t like his poetry so much to begin with but the poetry he’s written in recent years really speaks to me. It seems to get more and more kind of hushed and pure, which might not necessarily be a good thing but in this case it is. It’s very strong, I think, as a result.

LIT: Do you read any younger poets?
ASHBERY: I read a lot of younger poets. But the thing is, nobody has ever heard of them. [motions to a book on the table] This just happens to be here, but it’s a book by a young fellow in Brooklyn. His name is Robert Elstein. The book was sent to me, and I think his poetry is really wonderful. It was published in an edition of 200, and nobody knows about it.

LIT: Have you met Robert Elstein?
ASHBERY: Yes I have, twice now. His poetry is very funny. Published by Larry Fagin, a poet of my generation or a little younger. Let me read this to you. This is not very typical because every line is almost the same, sort of like some of my poems.

[reads “Prides of Place” by Robert Elstein]

LIT: Do you read any of the more established younger poets, such as Henri Cole, Louise Glück, or Anne Carson?
ASHBERY: Yes, I like all of them. Have you seen Anne Carson’s Nox? I think Nox is wonderful.

[Keriman enters the room]

LIT: We’re happy you’re here! We were just about to ask Mr. Ashbery how you met.
KERMANI: A friend of mine from my hometown—Albany—happened to have taken a class with John one summer. Was it at Indiana?
ASHBERY: Indiana University. A poetry workshop.
KERMANI: When I was a graduate student here in NY at Columbia in 1970, this friend was visiting me and telephoned John, hoping to see him. He got both John and me invited to a small cocktail party given by friends of his. I had never heard of John. So it was just an old hometown connection.
ASHBERY: The thing is, the people who were having the cocktail party—there were only about 8 people—we never saw them before or since. In fact, your friend, you barely saw since then; he was driving some of the people at the party to the airport.
KERMANI: Yeah, they all went to the airport.
ASHBERY: We were sort of left standing alone out on the sidewalk—
KERMANI: —and decided to have dinner together.
ASHBERY: It’s like the people existed only to introduce us.

LIT: Many of your poems suggest a kind of love affair with time and recollection: in “Composition,” the speaker says he is in love with “now” and “then” (though they are not in love with him). Is this a fair assertion?
ASHBERY: Yeah. By the way, Garrison Keillor read that on the air on my birthday one year. The thing is, there are not many subjects for poetry. There’s love, there’s time, there’s death, there’s getting old. People say that because I’m in my 80s, my recent poetry has this valedictory quality, but it’s always been there from the beginning. That’s what poetry seems to be for me.
This book was designed using three typefaces. The principal titles (and text here) are set in Univers, a typeface designed by Adrian Frutiger that is both utilitarian and expressive. The body text is set in Bookman Old Style, an old style serif designed by Alexander Phemister and distinguished for its legibility at small sizes. The cover and section titles are set in Knockout, which its designers at Hoefler & Frere-Jones call the ultimate American sans serif. This book is printed on 100% recycled eco-paper. Thank you to Alice Chung for a second pair of (perspicacious) eyes, and to my family for telling me that a font is a font and to go to sleep.

The editors-in-chief would like to thank J.D. McClatchy, Emily Barton, John Ashbery, David Kermani, Jesse Coleman, Brigid Hughes, Mark Strand, Homi Bhabha, Shoshana Felman, Wells Tower, Salvatore Scibona, Daphne Guinness, Rosanna Warren, Steven Klein, Robin Habur-Tenison, Valerie Steele, Bernard-Henri Lévy, and Edward Albee.

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fig. 9, section of a compact interior, Staedtler drafting pencil