

*Andrew Hudgins*

IN THE WELL | 069

My father cinched the rope,  
a noose around my waist,  
and lowered me into  
the darkness. I could taste

my fear. It tasted first  
of dark, then earth, then rot.  
I swung and struck my head  
and at that moment got

another then: then blood,  
which spiked my mouth with iron.  
Hand over hand, my father  
dropped me from then to then:

then water. Then wet fur,  
which I hugged to my chest.  
I shouted. Daddy hauled  
the wet rope. I gagged, and pressed

my neighbor's missing dog  
against me. I held its death  
and rose up to my father.  
Then light. Then hands. Then breath.

*Robert Hershon*

SENTIMENTAL MOMENT OR WHY DID THE  
BAGUETTE CROSS THE ROAD? | 080

Don't fill up on bread  
I say absent-mindedly  
The servings here are huge

My son, whose hair may be  
receding a bit, says  
Did you really just  
say that to me?

What he doesn't know  
is that when we're walking  
together, when we get  
to the curb  
I sometimes start to reach  
for his hand

*Nick Flynn*

CARTOON PHYSICS, PART 1 | 062

Children under, say, *ten*, shouldn't know  
that the universe is ever-expanding,  
inexorably pushing into the vacuum, galaxies

swallowed by galaxies, whole  
solar systems collapsing, all of it  
acted out in silence. At ten we are still learning  
the rules of cartoon animation,

that if a man draws a door on a rock  
only he can pass through it.  
Anyone else who tries

will crash into the rock. Ten-year-olds  
should stick with burning houses, car wrecks,  
ships going down—earthbound, tangible  
disasters, arenas

where they can be heroes. You can run  
back into a burning house, sinking ships

have lifeboats, the trucks will come  
with their ladders, if you jump  
you will be saved. A child

places her hand on the roof of a schoolbus,  
& drives across a city of sand. She knows  
the exact spot it will skid, at which point  
the bridge will give, who will swim to safety  
& who will be pulled under by sharks. She will learn

that if a man runs off the edge of a cliff  
he will not fall  
until he notices his mistake.

*Catherine Bowman*

1-800-HOT-RIBS | 060

My brother sent me ribs for my birthday.  
He sent me two six-pound, heavily scented,  
slow-smoked slabs. Federal Express,  
in a customized cardboard box, no bigger  
than a baby coffin or a bulrush ark.

Swaddled tight in sheaves of foam and dry ice,  
those ribs rested in the hold of some jetliner  
and were carried high, over the Yellowstone State  
and the Magnolia State and the Brown Thrasher State,  
over Kentucky coffeetrees and Sitka spruce  
and live oak and wild oak and lowland plains  
and deep-water harbors, over catfish farms  
and single-crib barns and Holiness sects  
and strip malls and mill towns and lumber  
towns and coal camps and chemical plants,  
to my table on this island on a cold night  
with no moon where I eat those ribs and am made  
full from what must have been a young animal,  
small-boned and tender, having just  
the right ratio of meat to fat.

Tonight outside, men and women enrobed  
in blankets fare forth from shipping crates.

A bloodhound lunges against its choke  
to sniff the corpse of a big rat and heaps  
of drippings and grounds that steam  
outside the diner as an ashen woman deep  
in a doorway presses a finger to her lips.  
A matted teddy bear impaled on a spike  
looms over a vacant lot where a line of men  
wreathe in fellowship around a blazing garbage can.

Tonight in a dream they gather  
all night to labor over the unadorned  
beds they have dug into the ground and filled  
with the hardwood coals that glow like remote stars.  
Their faces molten and ignited in the damp,  
they know to turn the meat infrequently,  
they know to keep the flame slow and the fire  
cool. From a vat of spirits subacid and brackish,  
they know to haste only occasionally. So that  
by sunrise vapor will continue to collect, as usual,  
forming, as it should, three types of clouds,  
that the rainfall from the clouds, it is certain,  
will not exceed the capacity of the river,  
that the river will still flow, as always,  
sweet brother, on course.