

Wild Strawberries of Mars

by Bud Smith

if I ever leave this city

 I'll walk straight out in chest high
meadowland grass

 until I come

 face to face with a startled animal
 who couldn't know where it belongs
 only that I am lost

 if I leave Earth I'll miss the blue and the white and the
unpredictable music

 If I leave my day job I might discover myself
 8 of us are in the break trailer at the refinery
 our hands are washed but still covered in oil
 I sip old coffee, Mike eats a tuna sandwich
 Paul licks his finger, flips through the newspaper
 "they're trying to colonize Mars"
 "how?"

 "sending people" Paul says, "one way ticket"

 Jimmy asks, "not coming back?"

 "nope, not coming back

 building a bio dome and they'll stay there
till they die"

I'm trying to buy a house in NJ

leaving home feels as difficult as drifting through space
there are as many variables
calculations must be precise

"we never even went to the moon" Todd says
he's eating cold Spaghetti-Os out of a can
ripped open with a dull knife

we could never be astronauts

Paul's wife is making him quit drinking because he passed out in the driveway, looking up at a sea of blurry stars. In the morning, he was covered in dew, and she ran over his left leg pulling out to go get bagels.

Todd has another baby on the way, but the doctors say the baby will have life long developmental problems—he and his girlfriend have until the end of the month to decide what to do

Keith's engine cracked in half like a metallic egg splitting open now he walks a half mile to the bus at 4am

and rides the bus up route 9 to the commuter lot

he won't buy a used car, he is terrified of viruses and bacteria he eats his donuts with a fork

Paul says, "8 men and 3 women are going and it'll take between 150 and 300 days to get there"

"I can't even do the 17 hour drive to Florida" Mike says, "I'd go bonkers in a spaceship"

"Imagine if we went" Todd says

I almost spit my coffee out

"good one"

"We'd have to kill each other over the women, resort back to primal instincts and stuff"

"I wouldn't kill any of you guys over a woman"

"Well, I'd kill you, man," Todd says, "To save the species or whatever"

"Girls are smart, they'd kill us off first"

Yesterday, I went and looked at a condo in Jersey City, the guy who was selling the place had the worst artwork I'd ever seen covering every wall of the place

One painting depicted a man in a space suit standing in a field of wild strawberries

The condo was big enough for me to want to live there with my wife, but the neighborhood seemed too dangerous for her, I was worried about her having to take the bus late at night here

When I asked the homeowner how the condo was cooled, he pointed to the windows on the ground floor, and said that he put in air conditioner window boxes. "What keeps people from pushing the window boxes in and climbing into your house?" He crossed his fingers

Luck

"Why are you moving away," my wife asked the lucky terrible artist

"I'm being forced out," he said, "it's not my choice"

Whoever chooses where they go?

"Mars is sketchy" Todd says. "What about aliens?"

"We'd be the aliens" I say.

I'd miss the stink of decay—salt water flooding the meadowlands

I'd miss the sound of traffic rushing on the night bridge

I'd miss the way the sun cooks the life out from temporary flowers. I don't think anyone leaves New York City willingly. They have to be carted off, screaming.

