

TRAVIS COLLINSON

The Pink, 2014
ACRYLIC ON LINEN, 20 x 17 IN



COURTESY ANGLIM GILBERT GALLERY

REBEKAH BLOYD

The Better Part of My Jupiter Year

Portraits from
my childhood
in a small town

The aerospace engineer Theodore von Kármán calculated that above an altitude of 100 km [about 62 miles], the atmosphere would be so thin that an aircraft would need to be traveling at orbital velocity to derive any lift. This altitude was later adopted as the Karman Line.

—Matt Williams, *Universe Today*

The trio of teachers trained in new methods created a kind of Karman Line: in entering our K-through-12, one-building farm-kid school, we entered space. In exchange for an atmosphere that supported soybeans and tomatoes, we got Saturn and Jupiter, the Jovian planets. For those two years known before as the sixth and seventh grades, in one half of one upper floor, we orbited inside a mid-1970s experiment: the open classroom.

No matter the walls were in place. We would learn at our own pace. Our questions would drive our learning.

No longer a sixth grader, as Jupiter I read through the SRA box of laminated cards, progressive levels signaled by their bright bands: aqua, violet, red, gold. The accompanying quizzes were to the point. Soon I was encouraged to bring my own books for reading time. In the afternoon, I might strategize ways to pry words out of the girl who kept herself near the window in a tiny room that once held the guidance counselor's office. One of the few new students ever to attend our farm-kid school, the slump-shouldered, tousled-hair girl Jo might utter "reportage" or "clandestine" if your words struck her fancy. Pressed into the realm of the experiment, mostly she was tight-lipped. "Neptune," I said under my breath. "Neptune," if we'd had one.

At home, I set in motion the minute clicks and rotations of the washing machine dial, the reddening coils of the electric cookstove. My tentative, persistent probings contracted my after-school time, as if I operated within the actual planet Jupiter's ten-hour day instead of Earth's twenty-four. Evenings, my father made his debit rounds, collecting monthly life insurance payments from the folks of Darke County, Ohio. Evenings, my older brother and I stirred Hamburger Helper in the cast-iron skillet; we ate instant potatoes from the saucepan while watching *M*A*S*H*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Maude*. On the dairy-filled, lazy weekend mornings, we sucked Lucky Charms from mugs, grilled our cheese sandwiches, or perfected our omelet flips. Our mother lived away from home the better part of my Jupiter year, and on into the summer, as she herself engaged in an experiment: taking double course loads to finish her undergraduate, then master's degrees.

Jupiters and Saturns held steady for two years; no advancements, no retrograde motion. The year after, we were deposited back on Earth, and into the eighth grade. By that year's end, the addition to our one-building school