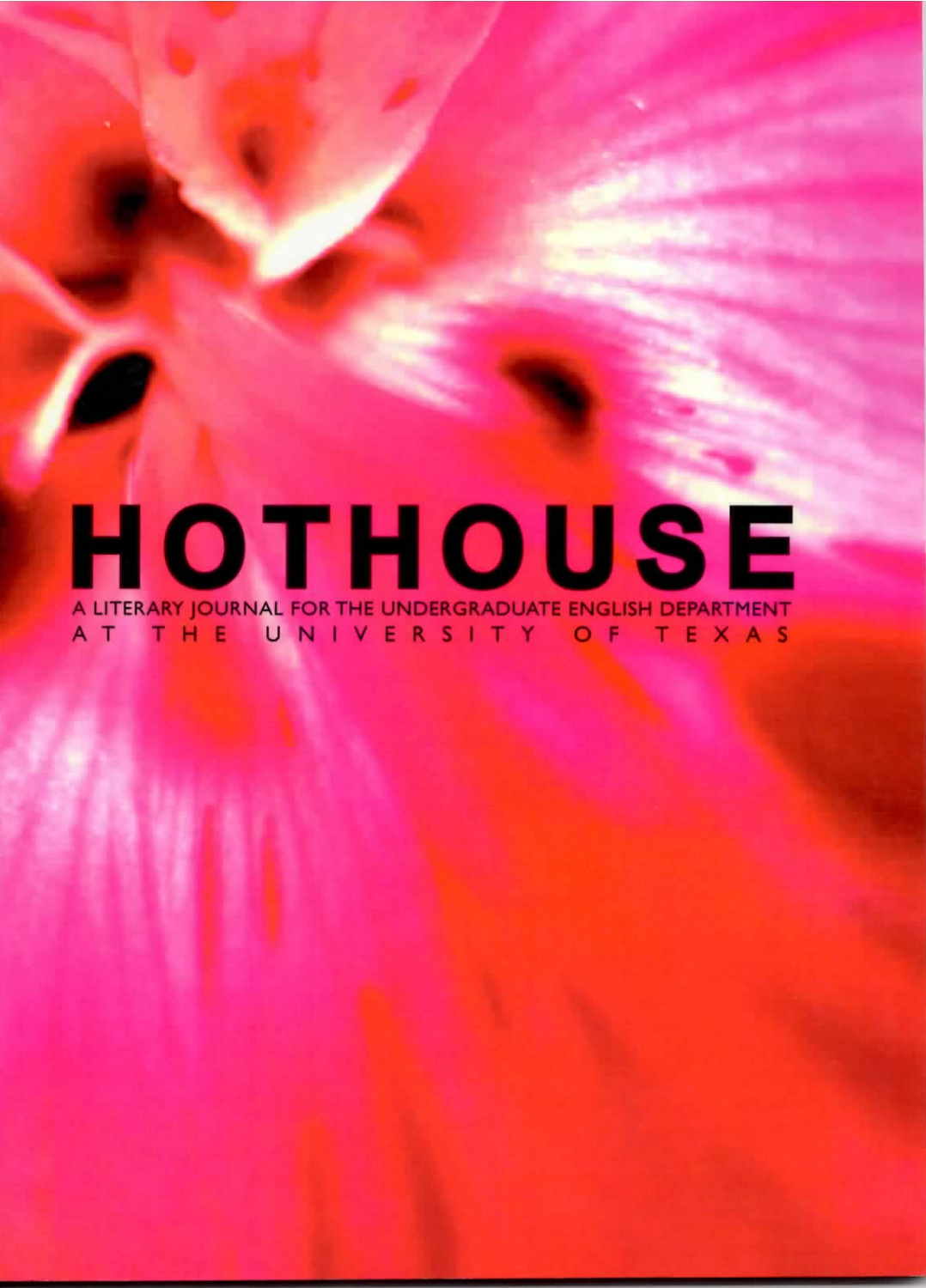




HOTHOUSE

A LITERARY JOURNAL FOR THE UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

H O T H O U S E

Editorial Staff

Paula Mendoza-Hanna
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

J. Scott Brownlee
MANAGING EDITOR

Madison Andrews
DESIGN EDITOR

Morgan Rogers
Runjini Raman
POETRY EDITORS

Andres Martinez
Meesha Savadkoohi
Jennifer Swain
FICTION EDITORS

Ryan Bender-Murphy
SPECIAL FEATURES EDITOR

Editor's Note

Hothouse began as a seed of an idea last Spring, and was nurtured by the collective desire of students to put forth something valuable into the undergraduate English community. From those first few meetings that drew many energetic volunteers, to the final group of people who would later press on to produce this journal now in your hand, everyone involved along the way has left their indelible imprint upon this pioneering issue.

Many thanks go out to Brad Humphries, Matt Harvey and the undergraduate English department who supported our endeavor every step of the way. In particular, Matt Harvey, whose office door was always open to our many inquiries and requests, and whose guidance and advice were invaluable to our fledgling staff.

I count myself extremely fortunate to have worked with such dedicated editors and to have had the opportunity to read so much exciting work. This journal is testament to the energy, passion and talent of the students within the undergraduate English department. I, along with the staff of *Hothouse*, are proud and pleased to present here, our first issue, and a new beginning.

Copyright © 2009 by The Undergraduate English Department at
The University of Texas at Austin. All Rights Reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

For more information about *Hothouse* visit our web site at:
www.uthouse.wordpress.com
or email us at hothouse.journal@gmail.com

Hothouse was printed by Morgan Printing.

Paula Mendoza-Hanna
Editor-in-Chief

Table of Contents

Christopher Rey Pérez

Another Dada Poet Unravels Himself
Acid Test
How Penelope Breaks Up
With Her Boyfriends

Johnny Meyer

Donnie's Place
Another Wasted Weekend with
the Anxiety of Influence
Judging an Officer
Did You Drink in the Army?
Catholic Suicide or Cancer

Matt Ingebretson

Surrounding John

Emily Bolt

Hurricane News

Meggie Hilkert

Disillusioned Teenager Seeks More of Same

Jonathan York

[Prose / Art]

From the Journal

Letter to Lydia

Rebecca Liendo	<i>Granny's Caddy</i>
Chris McGillicuddy	<i>Me and Jack</i>
Adam Schoen	<i>At a Wedding</i> <i>Mexico D.F.</i> <i>Laughing Wales</i>
Aboubacar N'Diaye	<i>Like Sackcloth of Hair</i>
Christopher Rey Pérez	<i>If I'm Silent</i> <i>Piss Drunk</i> <i>With Any Luck</i>
Owen Davis	<i>We Really Should Be Talking About</i> <i>This War We're In</i>
Dave Luciano	<i>Nonsense</i>

Ryan Bender-Murphy

Staring at the Face of God Through a Telescope Lens.
A review of *Quiver* by Susan B. A. Somers-Willett
and
Breaking the Birdcage.
An Interview with Dean Young

Acid Test

Christopher Rey Pérez

Puffy bangs
and form fitting blue jeans
are a back-alley to magic and mysticism,
the wicked tarot my mother warned me
to stay away from, the pungent musk
of old women altered into devils—
yerberias full of salvia and rosewort,

and yet, a sudden kiss
is conjured.

The way she slinks
around the talcum floor,
lolling her puppy tongue for blotter
and how she spaghetti dances
to whatever sweet Italo Disco croons
from the cornered dirty speakers,

confounds me. Disco ball fragments of
voodoo melody and synesthesia:
Her throat kicking dulcet low c's,
melting hips, straight leg Levis
cinched at the wanting waist

'till her body stresses
my salt brimmed hat that she teethes on
and the sweat that drips from her tamarind brow.

How many changing colors does she see
while I mirror every word for red?

nother Dada Poet Unravels Himself

A donkey dick
 sown in the wind
sprouts nothing
 meaningful,

yet lilacs can blossom
 from your arched back

 & slip into your lover's camisole
as you will one day
 slip into dust.

You can search
 every dictionary for your name
& find
 what you scratched out
years ago:

 words like reflection,
saliva, & gold,

verisimilitude,
 anvil, & child.

What questions are left, then,

 of you & someone else,
but really just you?

If you can't even spell "künstlerroman"
then why not fuck it all?

I am a tuba,
a tuba,
 a goddamn tuba.

How Penelope Breaks Up with Her Boyfriends

In a way,
there is a world where one is already company,
a world where cuckolds drink bathwater
and a world where every baby has a mommy
whose baby looks like little Jesus
because all babies look like replicas of love.

A baby is a baby. All babies are the same.

And there are two worlds that are the same.
There is a world that is unique and a world that is the same:
a world where the same snowflake that melts on your windowsill
melts on every head of the Hydra,
my slightly-smaller left breast,
or on our private tree—split by lightning.

There is also a world
where snowflakes are not snowflakes; they are only shapes.
And there is a world of equal-sized breasts
and too short wieners. There is a world where
my other lovers look like you,

a world where you try to look like us,
and a world where we look like no one—just snowflakes.

Donnie's Place

Johnny Meyer

On a similar Saturday, at about 4:22 PM, Rich and I were waiting for our food at the Catfish Parlor, which was not a parlor at all. The diner was merely a rundown shack, built decades ago, and noticeably sinking into a sandy patch of ground just a few blocks off the coast. The interior's texture resembled sun-dried driftwood. Seven incandescent light bulbs provided the sole source of illumination for the dining area, and these isolated fixtures revealed four uneven and squared-up tables. Rich and I sat in one of these tables, and the other three were empty. The walls, floor, and ceiling all resembled that sun-dried driftwood. The walls carried scattered signs of nostalgia for "Jonathan's Pale Ale", "Bloom's Advertising" and "Colonel Crawley's Investment Services."

I should add, somewhat needlessly, that this story takes place sometime after the tsunami failed to hit.

Anyhow, Rich and I were waiting for our food to show up. We both wore our good suits. To help you with a visual, we both appeared fairly nondescript as far as looks are concerned. I wore a four-button suit with a single jacket vent, and he, inevitably, wore a three-button suit with a single vent. Neither of us uses cufflinks. We sat in a fairly customary silence for a few moments, until Rich said out of boredom, "Even a complete lack of talent could not check your ambition."

"Thank you," I replied. "My ambition will be relieved at hearing this. But I think I'm better with your supposition, rather than having a lack of ambition check my God-given talent."

"That doesn't sound right," Rich said. Then he added,

"What a lack of talent fails to accomplish perhaps can be done by your incoherence."

"That's much more likely," I said.

The waiter returned from the kitchen and brought me three jumbo shrimp, fried, and two catfish strips, fried, all laid over a bed of potato wedges (fried).

Rich looked at the waiter expectantly, but the waiter ignored him, turned his back and left. There was a jukebox in the corner, and the jukebox did not say anything either. I poured a reasonable amount of ketchup onto my plate, replaced the lid on the bottle, and began eating. A minute later, the waiter returned with Rich's plate.

"Do you have tea?" I asked.

"Yes," said the waiter.

"Sweet tea?"

"No."

"Let me have some tea."

The waiter moved off and Rich discovered that there was no more ketchup left in the bottle.

Here is something about me: Rich does not drink. He does not drink wine or beer or liquor. Once, back before the tsunami didn't hit, he did drink, but this is no longer so. I do not drink at social functions when no one else in the party is drinking. So I did not have beer with my meal of jumbo shrimp and catfish strips.

Rich began searching the other three tables for ketchup, and he did not find any. The waiter returned with my tea. I took a sip, and it did not help. I tore open two sugar packets and poured them in, but this did not help either.

Rich sat back down, clearly defeated. I took a sip of the tea, and then put it back down. I did not pick it up again.

"I think I need a drink," I said.

"Alright," he replied, wearing that goddamn grin of his.

"You can have my ketchup."

I left some bills on the table and walked out into the

overcast gray day. I paused a moment, just to see if I could feel anything. The salted air eased through my hair. I scratched my head, and then I took the sunglasses out of my jacket and covered my eyes. I began walking back to my room at the hotel, and I saw that the clouds were not moving. A few cars passed without music, and I did not look at them. The hotel stood at the end of the street. The tsunami had not hit it, either.

I reached the hotel and it looked like this: The entryway (a sort of catwalk) led to a six story isolated rectangle just off the main drag. The hotel overlooked the ocean, which did not mirror the sky but still reflected its tempered enthusiasm. I walked through the hotel's entryway, across the catwalk, past a buffet, and onto an elevator. With alcohol on my mind, I pushed the "up" button.

I walked into the elevator and there was already someone on it, a young woman wearing sunglasses and red lipstick. Instead of turning around and facing the door, I simply faced the back of the elevator. It was not a large elevator, perhaps only one square yard.

The woman grew uncomfortable, which was a little unnatural, though I must admit that people generally do not like it when you face the back of the elevator—particularly when those people are only wearing sunglasses and red lipstick. She had already pressed the "7" button, but her discomfort prompted her to reach past me and press "3". The elevator took us to the third floor, and she slipped by me and stepped off. The doors began to slide shut and I turned to face them as they closed, catching a slight glimpse of the retreating naked girl. Once, I had a woman who would have gone with me to the seventh floor, but she was pregnant somehow and was no longer with me. I am quite certain that I did not cause the pregnancy. Somehow, we have ways of causing self-prescribed impotence with surgery, pills, or wrappers, or words.

The door opened on the seventh floor, and I stepped into the hallway and walked to my room, which was numbered "620", even

though there were only ten rooms on any given floor of the building.

I do not often think of how we keep score.

In the hallway I could hear the low thrust of air conditioning and the hard rasp of my key entering and disengaging the lock. I opened the door, and then illuminated the standard-sized bed, the polyester spread, the no-name print, and an underutilized writing desk. I shut the door behind me and now I could hear nothing. I noticed the television set, and I saw that I looked back at my own reflection in its opaque screen. Under the sink in the bathroom, there was a small refrigerator. I switched the light back off, which recast the room in darkness, and then stepped carefully through the perfect black and into the bathroom. I kneeled down and opened the door to the refrigerator. Light returned, casting a sallow glow over my body, and the ice box issued forth a cold hum accompanied by a gasp of diffused moisture. Inside, there were three shooters on the perfect white shelf—one liqueur, one whiskey, and one vodka.

The problem with shooters is twofold. One, they are quickly gone. Two, in hotels, and we are often in hotels, we do not know the cost. I bit my lip, closed the door and considered my options. Decisiveness is not our strong point.

I backed out of my room and avoided the elevator, opting for the stairs instead. The stairs, of which I know nothing, are more structurally sound than the elevator. Going up, I enjoy the stairs, but going down hurts my knees. No one else was in the stairwell. I negotiated my way to the primary floor and moved into the buffet area. Elderly citizens stood in a line waiting to pay for ice cream from another elderly citizen standing behind a cash register. The cashier wore a red vest, and a badge that declared, "BARBARA."

BAR-BUH-RUH, no, probably pronounced BARB-RUH.

My eyes moved left, to the buffet. There was a large dish full of fish. No, not fish, but scoops of various ice cream flavors, all stacked on top of each other, and dripping together. A placard stated in hand drawn marker: "\$15." Next to this was a second

bowl, this one full of vanilla yogurt, or maybe pudding (no one bothered to check), topped with strawberries. The sign read, "\$30."

Barbruh said, "Can I help you, honey?"

"Yes, please," I said, "I'm looking for a drink."

"I could sell you one, but I think you should try Donnie's. It's just down the drag, at the corner." The elderly citizens looked at me expectantly.

"Thank you," I said. "What's that place like?"

"I don't know," she said, "I don't know anyone who's been in there."

Disappointed, I left the buffet, and then I left the hotel by retreating across the catwalk. I hit the open air, which remained bottled by the cold clouds. I looked down the street and saw a corner, the potential location of Donnie's. Donald's place. Or maybe Donnie was a woman. Could a woman be called Donnie? Could a man be called Donnie? Who could not be called Donnie? I resolved to name my next dog "Donnie". I have never in my life owned a dog.

I reached the corner, but instead of finding Donnie, I found Surf and Turf. This had also not been hit by the tsunami, and imprisoned within its glass display case stood stately mannequins wearing swim trunks and sunglasses. The mannequins were all standing quite still. There was only one female mannequin, and she was obsidian black and very naked. I turned away and faced the ocean. There was no sign of another tsunami.

Consoled and distempered, I still wanted a drink.

A man in a trench coat, sunglasses, and a fedora came towards me, and I grabbed his arm, saying "Do you know where I can find Donnie?" but he elbowed me in the ribs and, without a word, continued walking towards the island where he worked. A passing bicyclist screech-stopped, jumped off his bike and smiled at me. I could tell he wasn't Roman.

He asked, "Did you say Donnie's?"

"Roughly," I answered.

"Well," he said, "roughly, you'll find it behind Surf and Turf. It's in the alley." He smiled again.

"Many thanks."

"Just one 'thanks' at a time, please, or you'll never get anywhere." And then he started staring at the mannequins.

I left him standing before the store, adjacent to the shore, and I moved around the corner and into an alley filled with people, and I was immediately confronted by a blue neon sign that read, "Donnie's Cool Dark Pool Hall Featuring ____ the Irish Migrant Worker." I marveled at the way it failed to roll off the tongue. The sign itself made it difficult to focus on the door situated just beneath the word "Migrant". And then I noticed a second sign on the door itself that read, "No knives allowed (or machetes)." This put me off for a moment, but then I bit my lip and unbuckled my machete and placed it on the ground. Then I took off my sunglasses and left them with the machete.

I stepped towards the portal, but as I reached out to touch the door, a man without a fedora or a trench coat accosted me.

"I think you should know," he said.

"What should I know?" I asked. I noticed that he wore sunglasses. "Nice glasses," I added.

"They don't let you bring knives in there, but they really should."

"Why?"

"So you can defend yourself. You might get stabbed." At this he lifted his t-shirt and exposed a jagged pink scar that ran from his abdomen to his armpit on the side of the heart.

I turned away from him. I opened the door and stepped inside. I could see and hear nothing (nothing) and I knew that I was alone in the room. I closed my eyes. I thought of that girl I once knew, and I thought of the seventh floor that we used to go to. Suddenly she was there with me, very naked and pregnant. I reached for her, and I held her hand and I pulled her to me, and I felt the child inside her pleasantly smooth skin. She was warm, and I was cold.

It was then that we felt the first tremors of the tsunami.

Another Wasted Weekend with the Anxiety of Influence

I

It died last night (my favorite pen)
And now the blue pills aren't working
If they ever did.
I'll wake up sometime tomorrow and
Not go running.
For now I'm putting on Hamlet
And wishing I knew Yorick.

II

I wake up,
She leaves,
The mattress reads:
"notice:
this mattress
is designed
to resist
combustion
which may result
from a smoldering cigarette."

III

In Milton's meter I decide to write
Some verse for her, but then I remember
That she cannot stand any more iambs.
For her, pentameter generally lost
Its touch after a dose of Prince Hamlet's
Circled soliloquies, and though I think
I could offer something a little more
Direct and less verbose and less wordy
And stronger in intention I decide
To play it safe and not write anything.

We write illusions, and we have too many.

IV

By lunchtime I'm eating breakfast.
Lay on the linoleum tile
With me
And we will catch tigers.

Can I promise you the tigers?

V

A storm, a strike, a fight, a fire,
And yet nothing but a weekend gone?
No, my soul, you must be wrong;
You can't let fear suppress a song.

Is it wrong to hate a child
For clinging to its mother's breast?

Is it traumatic stress disorder
If you like traumatic stress?

Please don't tell me that I'm wrong;
You can't deny that the will is strong.
No, my soul, it does not seem right,
But our human hands unseat the Christ.

VI

I do not need blue pills,
I do not sleep poorly,
For I suffer incessant dreams.

Did You Drink In the Army?

Did I drink in the
Army? You mean did we drink
in the Army? We drank
some, yes. We drank not to
numb the pain or to say we did
but to kill Time, to slit her
salacious throat and slide
naked down the waxed and bloodied
hallway of the barracks while
we took turns with her still,
still warm body, sometimes
in the showers to keep the
sheets and bunks in neat four-cornered
folds. Always we drank together
(no, sometimes alone)
and threatened one another with
broken bottles and K-bar blades,
sharpened on both sides, and
guns, of course. The guns
were not dangerous; we had
too much respect for our
accomplishments with them to waste rounds or people,
and those who had not yet taken
the trip across needed
to pass some sort of standard,
like slugging a liter or sharing
a new barracks girl.

Sometimes I feel their looks
(my new family)
and they think I'm watching someone
die again and sometimes this

is true, but it's not, just as often.

Just as often I'm back
in the barracks and smashing
my face open and waiting to
blackout. To blackout. To
sleep really, to sleep a little,
for once you reach a dizzy
kind of spin through
the hallways and can't find your gun and can't
stop crying for the loss of it, it's best
to blackout and wake up
later, or not at all.

The difference, you see, is not all that great.

Catholic Suicide or Cancer

i.

And yet I am young, yet I choose this to be

before	the almond tree blossoms
before	the locust grows sluggish
before	the caper berry is without effect

Yet soon

The silver chord is snapped
The golden bowl is broken
And the pitcher is shattered at the spring

To understand, without humility, that
We cannot stop the cold.

ii.

I cannot break the image:
A pillow and blanket
Wrapped in wood
Drawn over me by time?
It is not mine to hold –
Is there a Creator?
Does he begin to take It?
I panic more than I should,

I strive against the uncertainty (don't like this)
That begins with a certain end.

iii.

Perhaps any wood can make a fire,
But that cut down in prime will burn the brighter.

Surrounding John

Matt Ingebretson

I want to start this off by saying that I do not want to be here. I am here for John and nobody else. This is something that I have deliberately avoided for his entire life. John is different, I know that, but he has never needed any therapy. Is that clear? It is in light of recent events that I have pushed aside my conviction, and what I am afraid might be my better judgment, to ask you for help. Advice, rather, on something I feel has gone beyond my capabilities as a mother. I feel very small when I try to approach this problem. I threw up in the restroom before I came in here because I am sick to my stomach with the thought that this might be my fault—bad mothering. Do you think I'm a bad mother? I want you to be honest with me here. I know I just met you but I don't want you to shit me here because I'm taking this seriously and I hope to God that you are taking this seriously as well because this is important to me. I feel insecure right now and I want you to psycho-shit analyze me and tell me whether or not I am a good mother. John's cereal yells at him when he eats it. It frightens him. At least, this is what he tells me while he stares vacantly down at the bowl. He eats Rice Krispies. But instead of snapping, crackling, and popping, he claims that it screams at him and calls him the devil and tells him that he is brutally murdering entire families of kernels by crushing them between his molars and then forcing them through his digestive system. He will not look at me in the eye when he tells me this. He keeps his head bowed down looking at the floral placemats I keep on the table. I keep them there to create a specific environment for my child because that's what mothers are supposed to do. Do you understand this? He won't look at me.

I am glad you do not have a sense of humor about this. Some of my dear, dear friends have had a sense of humor about this and I have had to say hurtful things to them. Our friendships are strained. John is not stupid. He is not. So I want you to erase that thought from your brain immediately. If I even get the slightest impression that you might think he has a small intelligence I will walk out of here right now and report you is that clear? I will find someone to report you to. I could not be more serious about this issue. I have argued with him about this, by the way, and offered him new types of cereal, so don't even suggest that because I've already tried. I don't know why he is doing this. It confuses me. He lies to me I know he does. Not just about the cereal but about other things – like what he does when he locks the door to his room. He tells me he is meditating on his life goals and choices, but anyone with half a brain and an eye could tell that he is a compulsive liar. I've always known that John is different. What I didn't expect was that he would weave intricate stories every morning about how he is under extreme mental duress for mercilessly slaughtering his breakfast. He tells me that he is responsible for mass genocide. He tells me that the world has never known such atrocities. That he doesn't even deserve to live after what he's done. He doesn't look at me when we speak. Is this all making sense to you? Is this setting off any alarms in your highly educated head? I need you to tell me why he is doing this. I need you to tell me what to do because it's making me anxious. I'm losing my grasp on things here and I'm nervous. Nervous as in my heart rate increases when I get near him. 17 watching "Halloween" nervous. Nobody prepared me for this. The books said nothing. But let me tell you that if you start talking about Freud and psycho-sexual fears I will take my money elsewhere. If you tell me this has to do with his desire to kill his father and have sex with me I am going to flip-shit out on you right now. That being said, help me. If you have any grace in your heart you will help me. Tell me how to fix it and I will. Just tell me how and I'll do it. I'm helpless here and I've become nervous. I am not a nervous person but I don't understand how to approach my son. I truly hope, sir, that you never have to suffer through

what I have gone through. I truly, truly hope so because it's hell. It is nothing but hell. The baby-to-child-to-teenager-to-troubled young adult has taken it's toll on me, and I went to college and I'm not stupid but I don't know how to handle this situation and I need you to tell me what needs to happen here because the situation is not getting better and I feel physically fatigued from thinking about this and I wake up at night with severe stomach pain from the stress this puts on me and I need to you tell me how to fix it. Do you have a cigarette?

John! Hey, John wait up! Hi John, you are very fast. I could barely keep up with you. Things are silly on the playground today. I was drawing with some chalk right over there earlier when I saw you... My name's Lisa by the way. I tried to draw a picture of you with the chalk right over there but I couldn't do it right and then couldn't erase it because chalk is really hard to erase. That's why my hands are all pink. I don't know why I tried to draw you I just wanted to. John, I just want to tell you that I don't care what those other boys say or if they push you down on the ground and call you mean names and pull your hair and put grass in your ears. I don't know why they do that but I think that it's rotten and I don't like it. I think that it's fine to play hopscotch and I didn't like it when they dragged you away from the hopscotch boxes. Oh John, you got some grass stains on your shorts! There's green all over them. It'll be ok though because once I got some grass on my white blouse that I was wearing with my pink skirt and my yellow headband and my mom got it out. I'm glad too because the white blouse is my favorite. What are you going to play on the playground for the rest of the time? I think I'm going to draw some more chalk. Do you want to come?

John.

Oh ok. Playing in the sandbox is fun too. Boys always like to play in the sandbox. I don't like getting sand in my shoes. Look, I wore my white ones today. They're only seven days old and they're still white. Look at them John. See how white they are? They're my new favorites. John why aren't you – oh John don't cry. John why

are you crying? John let me help you get that grass out of your ears. Oh John please don't cry. Here, have my hankie. Let's go sit down ok John?

I think I'm high enough to be philosophical. Are you ready to be philosophical?

John.

To be honest, John, that question was fucking rhetorical and I planned on disregarding your answer before I even asked it. So you can screw, John, because I'm going to be philosophy whether you like it or not.

John.

Good. John, sometimes I just feel like I'm full of shit. All the time full of shit. Like I never say anything. Pass me the bowl. I'm not a genuine human being is what I'm trying to say. Do you know what I mean? Everything is contrived. I got accepted to Johns Hopkins Med by the way.

John.

Thanks. Everybody has been excited for me. But do you know what I do when people tell me how excited they are for me? I pretend like it was nothing. Like I just got lucky and that anybody could have done it. But do you know what? I didn't just get lucky. I fucking worked my ass off to get into Johns Hopkins. I spent hours studying and volunteering at the fucking free-clinic that smells like cracked-out-bird-shit-something to pad my resume. None of it was luck. It was calculated. I never slept, John. I knew what I was doing. So when I tell them it is nothing and that I just got lucky I am lying to them.

John.

I tell them it was nothing because humble people get the love in this world. Humans don't like cocky. I want to tell them that I deserve it and that I am fucking Jesus Christ and his holy Father-Lord-God for getting in but I know they would think I am conceited. But I am conceited. And the fact that I pretend to be humble makes me even more conceited. Do you understand what I'm saying, John? There's no such thing as genuine outside of sex

and fear and the filthy combination of the two. No, I'm good; you take the rest. I'm going to take a nap.

For fuck's sake, John, why didn't you wrap your Secret Santa present? Fucking Christ. Now everyone already knows what you bought. Rule number one of Secret Santa: be secretive. Thanks for ruining the office Christmas you low-life piece of shit.

John, I broke some of your plates.

John.

Right before you came in. I threw them against the wall in your kitchen. There are a few chips in the wallpaper.

John.

Because, John, I'm not happy. I'm not happy in this relationship anymore.

John.

For about three months now. I thought I would get over it but I haven't. And John, I threw five plates. I'll repay you for them.

John.

You're self-absorbed John. I'm not a needy girl, but I can't get anything out of you. You're an internal person, John, and I can't find my way in.

John.

Please don't, John. Please don't. Please don't. You don't even need me. I can see right now that you're brain's twirling inside your head and justifying this situation. You'll move on quickly, and that's why this isn't working. You're the type of person that moves on quickly, and I'm the kind that doesn't. I'll send you money for the plates. And the bowl. You'll see the broken glass on the floor in the kitchen. I threw all of them hard and they barely scratched the wall-paper. I'm going to Stella's house now.

John let's go out to my shop for a moment I would like to talk to you. Please put that truck down and come with me – John... right now. Do not bring the truck. We need to go out into the shop so we can be in the correct atmosphere. The goddamned yellow

wallpaper in this living room is not going to be conducive to the type of conversation we'll be having. It means "to assist in." John, I want you to pay attention to me now. Give me a few moments of your time without bombarding me with silly questions because this is important. Pull up that end table. You can sit down on that. John.

No, John, I don't need to sit down. I need to be able to stand and pace and think. A man needs space to move when he's speaking. I'm going to be doing a lot of pacing in just a moment here. Mom can't be out here for this. This is a conversation that has to be had between two men. John, your mother is a wonderful woman but right now at this moment while we're talking it's best that she just stay up in that sewing room where she is right now. It's best for her and it's best for us. This is a conversation between men. Stop rubbing your palms together. John, if I have to ask you again I'm going to get physical do you understand? Now, John, listen to me because this is important. You are never going to be tall. Stop fiddling with that old microwave. Goddamnit, John, stop it. You are going to be a short man when you get older. I want you to wrap your mind around that right now. The men in our family line are short. Not short in a grotesque sort of way but short nonetheless. You won't have any sort of physical advantage in the game of basketball. Listen to me, John. Your mother and I didn't sign you up for the city league this year. It's for the best. John.

We signed you up for soccer. I can't watch another season of you fumbling around the basketball courts trying to keep up with boys twice your size. Soccer is your game now. It is important for you to play because that's what boys do. John stop crying. This is why I didn't call your mother out here in the first place. She would just coddle you right now. Goddamnit, John, I said stop crying. The last thing you need is coddling. I want you to be reasonable here. I want you to appeal to your logic. It's time for you to understand your strengths and weaknesses. John, you're never going to be able to reach things on the tops of cabinets. Your arms will be too short even when you are fully grown. You will always need to use

a stool. Do you know that mahogany stool we keep in the kitchen cupboard for me to reach things on tops of the cabinets? Someday you'll have to buy one of your own. Every man has to reckon with his own body at one point or another.

John.

5' 6". Maybe 5' 7". God didn't bless you with a tall frame John and that's fine. God has his own agenda. Look at me, John, I'm no giant and I get along. I'm telling you this John because it's important that you start preparing mentally. You need to appeal to logic here son. John, while I have this thought on the tip of my brain I want to get it out. It's time for you to stop wearing those polka-dot pyjamas. I know your mother said you could wear them but men don't wear pyjamas like that.

John.

Underwear and a white v-neck t-shirt; even when it's cold. John, stop fiddling with that TV knob. It's loose and I don't want it to come off because sometimes I watch TV out here. John, I'm going to share a secret with you because this is a man's space, and we can share men's secrets. When I come into this shop every Sunday and lock the door I watch a game of baseball. John this shop is my sanctuary. I watch baseball and I be a man.

John.

John, you don't have to play sports to love sports. You'll learn that someday. When I am in my shop I am a man. Your mother can't misunderstand me in here. She can't misunderstand me because I lock the door. John, there are things a man has to do in solitude. For me that thing is baseball. Your going to learn all of this as time goes on but I want to prepare you. I want to prepare you for the solitude you are going to experience. For the height deficit you will have. John, you're not going to be a hairy man either. Look at my legs John. These are your legs. Strong calves and weak knees. You'll soon understand why your mother cannot buy clothing for me. Why I have to try it on. Because the way a man looks is important, John. It says something about his character. And what do you think it would say about my character if I walked around with pants that didn't fit me well? I wear pleats, John, and your

mother doesn't understand that. That's why it's important that she's up in her sewing room right now. We need to have this conversation in private. John, stop touching the microwave. And John, we're going to start dressing you up better. You don't need pleats yet but soon you will. Your body will change in ways that are not always comfortable for you. You might go bald like me. But that one is not certain so I don't want you to start worrying about it too much. Just be aware of the possibility. I want you to be mentally prepared for these things John. John, do you hear me? You're going to learn a lot of things. And I'm going to make you ready.

Why does he do that? Why does he yell his lines when he gets on stage? During play practice in the choir room he says them normally; brilliantly, really. He says them just how he did during the tryout which his why I put him in this role to begin with. Peter Pan does not scream. He raises his voice sometimes, but only ever so slightly and all the while keeping a coyness about him that gives an extra punchy 'fuck-you' to Captain Hook. That's how the lines should be delivered. I feel like I'm in a horror movie right now. I'm being serious about that. Does he not sound like a character in a horror movie? I'm going to have to cut this kid. No one will want to watch this.

This is the most awkward part of relationships for me. The part after sex and after cuddling, because I can never sleep. It takes me forever to fall asleep and I don't know why. And so I just talk. And, as you will find out, talk so much that the guy laying next to me – in this situation that would be you – can't fall asleep either. This isn't a "girl thing" either so if you're thinking that, fuck you. I don't know why I do it. And even right now; I can see you want to go to sleep but I'm not going to let you. I'll probably start talking about my sister soon. Talking about family after sex is strange, I know, but I'm going to do it anyway. And it's not because I want my sister in any sort of subconscious sexual way so don't think that you pervert. Tonight was wonderful, John. And do you know

what? I'm glad you don't bring me flowers. It's too antiquated. And sexist even. Why shouldn't I be bringing you flowers? Jesus, that pasta primavera was good. I didn't even know I liked that. To be totally honest with you, I don't even like vegetables and just pretend to like them in public because I don't want to freak people out. I'm self-conscious about being an adult who doesn't like vegetables. But holy mother that pasta was good. I don't even know what that sauce was. And you know what? I don't want to know. I want it to be secret and magic. Stop laughing! I'm being serious! It was just a magic sauce that made the vegetables taste good and that's all I need to know. Magic primavera. Do you know what my Black Freedom class professor would say about the sauce? He would say that the sauce represents the underlying fears that Caucasian Americans hold about their inability to stay in control of a nation that is diversifying by the minute. All because the sauce is white. I love that class; everything is racist. But I think I like the sauce more than the class and I don't care if I'm a bigot for liking it. If I ever like, really, really need to know what's in it so I can make it, I'll just call my sister because she is an incredible cook and she'll know.

We have gathered here today to acknowledge the passing of Albert and Cindy Wittig, who died on the 21st of this month in a car accident. Losing loved ones unexpectedly is never easy. We ask the Lord for guidance and the ability to forgive the man in the other vehicle, for he knew not what he was doing. It is in times like these that we truly learn how to lean on what we have. And learn that it is important to lean. Albert and Cindy's son has prepared something.

John.

Sister Lea, please hand John a handkerchief.

Johnny, did I ever tell you about the war? I spent four goddamned years over in that shit-hole and all I got to show for it is goddamnit I need to fix this old porch-swing. How's your side holding up Johnny?

John.

Good. But my side needs some work. I get tired of things falling apart on me. By god I'm starting to fall apart. Been using this damned cane since the war but now my wrist hurts if I walk around too much. From the pressure, see? You know about pressure, Johnny? Newton's law and all. I took a little schooling after I got back but never finished it up. Schooling just wasn't for me. But I remember this one fella', Newton, and all about his pressure. You see this cane? It props me up so I don't have to use my bad leg so much. It's putting pressure on me you see? But here's the goddamned thing. When it puts pressure on me I put pressure right on back—an equal pressure. And that pressure's coming from my wrist and making it sore. It's one of Newton's goddamned laws. This guy's got a few of them laws. I don't remember 'em all though. Probably only the lawyers know all the laws about Newton and this goddamned porch-swing is about to drive me up the wall. Johnny, looks like your mother's calling you. Better head back soon. Johnny I just want to tell you that – gahhh! Fpppppphhhhhtttt. Fpphht. You see that Johnny? Goddamned fly just flew in my mouth. What the hell is this world coming to that a fly's gonna just fly into my mouth? Goddamnit. Now Johnny your mother's calling you now so you'd better be a good boy and head on back. You listen up to your mother. Johnny, I want you to listen up to people. That's how you learn things. You just make sure and come over tomorrow night and we'll finish our talk. And I'll buy some goddamned bug spray.

Hurricane News

Emily Bolt

On the news tonight

Anchors feel the weight
Of their name
Their faces—as neutral as unsalted crackers
Their hearts—a nest of hungry baby birds
Standing staunch
Like gothic statues
Only seemingly—unmoving

Tonight

The tide is hungry for the coast
The salt and foamy mouth
Wraps around empty homes
Whirling paper and branches
A stallion stampede of waves
Wildly rises from the blurred horizon

Run from the storm—it is coming
To reclaim
The land
We have waged
Our lives upon

Humble us
We are dried brown leaves
In need
Of being
Re-earthed

disillusioned teenager seeks more of same

Meggie Hilker

this little glowing room
won't give me up and
i almost forgot how to read once.

what happened to conversation?
i get nervous around
nearly anyone now.

my pet-baby and i,
we take naps during daylight and
and then we run in circles going nowhere.

Nineveh

Jonathan York

From the Journals:

You come home at dark when the rain has started and no one knows
yet that you're in the house. Hanging on the purple clouds, the
raindrops are wet lines holding black clothes. There are noises in the
house, but you can't say if there are people . . .

FROM THE JOURNALS —

YOU COME HOME AT DARK
WHEN THE RAIN HAS STARTED
AND NO ONE KNOWS YET
THAT YOU'RE IN THE HOUSE.
HANGING ON THE PURPLE
LOUDS, THE RAINDROPS ARE
LET LINES HOLDING BLACK
OTHERS. THERE ARE NOISES
THE HOUSE, BUT YOU CAN'T
IF THERE ARE PEOPLE...



THE LAST WORD, 'YOU',
WAS THE DIFFICULT ONE.
THE TWO BEFORE IT
DID NOTHING TO STIR ME
BUT THE LAST ~~ONE~~ WAS
A MIRROR THAT LOOKED
MY REFLECTION AWAY.



LETTER TO LYDIA —

I LOVED TO HEAR ABOUT
YOUR CLOTHES. WHEN,
SHAPES AND COLORS
WERE DESCRIBED TO
ME, I MADE UP TEXTURES,
SCENTS, AND TASTES FOR
THEM. MAY WE FEED
THE BODY'S IMAGINATION.
MAY WE COMPLICATE

To Lydia:

I loved to hear about your clothes. When shapes and colors were
described to me, I made up textures, scents, and tastes. May we
feed the body's imagination. May we complicate the mystery
between us, never solve it, remain in definitions as private as the
motion of one finger across one fingernail.

I used to believe there were words for what I mean. Now I am sure
that those were attempts to make generality out of the most
particular. Not only does experience change with each lover and each
time one sees each lover, but desire changes, and all that is not
consummation is desire. How can we give a single name to what is
born every day to a new life?

When it's cold here I want to lead you through the night streets to a door
in an alley, and in the narrow room inside I want to torture you—

Granny's Caddy

Rebecca Liendo

Rigid white metal
 rusted at the seams,
 polished silver emblem, North Star on the hood.

Idle at a light
 the engine shakes and groans,
 a mile between us and green.

Clear candy windows
 take in the 103° haze and Tejano music,
 the dying green cross made from a palm spins.

Smooth red vinyl
 the kind of red my mother
 would not let me wear, sticks to the back of my legs.

Plastic black ashtray
 cleaned out everyday
 no ash to smudge, she made smoking appear clean.

Slender fingers tap
 the Virginia Slim outside the window,
 puff of smoke exhaled out and away.

Ash Brown Clairol
 dyed hair perfectly coiffed and unyielding,
 as we cruise down Meadow St. in Grandma's Cadillac.

e and Jack

ris McGillicuddy

It rains. Warm, like in the summer. That's when we go to the beach. The soap is slippery in my hand. I have to hold on tight so it won't fall. Rubbing the soap on my body gets rid of the germs, but it won't work without water. It rained yesterday. We were walking in the park and had to stand under the trees to keep us dry. I walked down to the river. Water swims over the rocks and into my ears. I bend down to pet them. The water licks my fingers cold went up my hands arms into my stomach clapping down the trees hit by wind and drop drop drops filled my head quiet and nice. Then I heard the angry dog. The air was cold and heavy, but I was sweating barking growling snapping at Jack. Water got in my shoes forgot they were in the river my socks soaked up the rain makes everything darker. It turns the sky gray and the trees almost black. I tried yelling at the dog to make it stop but that didn't work its eyes grew big and angry white teeth cut into him but he didn't scream at the clouds mixed with the sky trees fell into the grass and melted away. I should've heard the wind or the rain but my ears were full. I watched the water in my shoes freeze I couldn't move. It was still raining because I felt small drops of water fall from the leaves.

The shampoo bottle looks like a fish. Its nose opens so when I squeeze it the shampoo comes out I have to use because Jack told me to and he knows when I don't. It can get in my eyes and sting them. I have to be careful. The ocean is warmer in Duck a long time ago when Daddy, Mommy, Jack and me would go there together. That was when we all lived in the same house but

we had fun at the beach. Daddy swam in the ocean and went out so far I couldn't see him until he came back to dry off mommy would go in the water with us, but we never went out as far as Daddy. When we weren't playing in the water, Mommy would read to daddy sat in his chair and napped with me and Jack would build sandcastles and sometimes Jack and Daddy would dig a hole for me to lie down in and they would all bury me up to my neck. The sand cooled me off and the waves would be quiet because I was lying down.

The handle cools off my hand, but the water keeps the rest of me warm. It feels strange. I push down. The water stops.

"Pat, did you wash your hair?"

"Yes."

"Did you use shampoo?"

"I said 'Yeeessssss!'"

"Alright."

Jack comes into the bathroom with a towel. "Come here Pat." My feet walk to him on the slippery ice. I have to be careful. The towel blocks out the light. Sometimes clouds covered the sun at the beach the sky got darker and my skin would grow goose bumps. When the clouds moved it was warm and bright and again I had to squeeze my eyes to block out the sun when I closed them all the way I would see red. Ouch! Jack hurts my hair. He should be more gentle.

"Jaaack."

"Hold on Pat."

Jack didn't go to the beach much because the sun burned his skin. That's why I use sunscreen, but sometimes I still burn. Then it's hard to sleep because when I touch anything it hurts even wearing a shirt. I hope my hair won't catch on fire.

"OK."

The light paints the walls yellow. Not like the sun. It got darker with the clouds, but it didn't rain. That's why there weren't any angry dogs. My hair looks messy in the mirror not like Jack's hair is short and won't move because he puts gel in it. Air cools

off my head and puts out the fire. Jack rubs the towel on my body to dry me off. I don't need a towel to dry off at the beach where the sun does that. Mommy and Daddy brought towels anyway you can lie down on them and not get sandy. Water drips down my legs, rolls off my feet and makes small puddles around them on the floor. I have to try not to slip.

"Lift up your arms Pat."

If I hit my head, I'll have to go to the hospital. I don't want stitches. The towel licks up the water I have to be gentle with Zoey wanted to be nice and Zoey is soft so when I hugged her Debbie got mad at me and said I needed to be nice. I can't hear when my ears are full of ringing sirens there was almost a fire she made me bleed Mommy and Debbie don't like each other Mommy says Debbie's mean to her I don't like people bullying Mommy so sometimes I yell at Debbie then Daddy yells at me and tells me I shouldn't be mean that makes me want to lie down in my room and try to fall asleep hey, that tickles.

"Keep still Pat."

"Ha ha haha ha."

The towel is like a feather birds are too fast for me we fed them at the park I tried to catch one. It flew away.

"Ok Pat." Jack takes the towel outside and comes back with my pyjamas. "Here ya go."

"Thanks."

I need the pyjamas to sleep so the sun can wake up. When it's cold the sun sleeps longer. I don't want to sleep because I have to go to school tomorrow. I pull up my pajama pants and make sure they won't fall. They're soft like Zoey, but they won't scratch me because they don't have whiskers. The ice could make me slip and hit my head I need to be careful when it's colder outside now because it's dark and the leaves are changing colors it won't snow before all the leaves turn brown and fall off the trees first if it snows a lot, I won't have to go to school because it won't be safe to drive. Then me and Jack can go sledding. The shirt buttons are tiny, but they're still hard to fit through the holes. When

we're done playing, we can sit by the fire to get warm sometimes it turns green or blue if we use newspaper to start the flames shake like grass when the wind blows everything gets quiet and I can only hear the wood pop. Careful Pat. Don't fall. The snowball cools my hand, but it won't melt I turn it and open the door.

"Alright Pat, it's...aw Pat, you buttoned your shirt wrong."

"No I didn't."

"Yeah you did. Here-"

Hey! Hey! My shirt's coming off! I don't need another shower.

"Calm down Pat. I'm fixing it."

"My buttons are fine!"

"Hold still."

Buttons buttons buttons buttons buttons buttons buttons.

"There."

My shirt didn't fall off, "Gee, thanks."

"No problem Pat. Time for bed."

"Alright." I don't want to go to bed. Furry carpet sleeps under my feet if I wake up then I'll have to go to school. Jack makes the bed for me, but I don't want to see Trevor or work Daddy makes me work—not like Mommy—even when I'm good and I'm going to Daddy's after school tomorrow. Daddy doesn't make Jack work he only helps Jack if he has trouble. Pyjamas keep me warm and soft. Must be gentle.

"Here ya go Pat."

The bed creeks at me when I sit on it. Cool pillows keep my head from catching on fire. The covers toast me up, but I won't get burned because I use sunscreen. Jack forgot sunscreen at the beach.

"Lights on or off?"

"Off."

Jack turned the lights off like when I turned off the rain.

"Goodnight Pat."

Soft ice sits behind my head, "Goodnight." The door sounds like pebbles hitting each other when it shuts. Yellow crawls under the door the walls are dark, but I'm not cold I'm under

the covers. TV talks to me from downstairs I don't want to sleep someone left the TV on. The wind hits the trees outside my window. After school I go to Daddy's TV laughs at me trees grow in the park just like Trevor Daddy makes me work. Leaves turn off the sun so do clouds. I can't go to school. Leaves stop the rain, but not all of it. I can't go to Daddy's.

Maybe I don't have to wake up. I can stay in my dreams. I don't have to go to school in my dreams. Trevor's not in my dreams either. There's no falling, no Daddy to make me work, and no Dogs to bite anyone. Me and Jack can play at the beach and the sun won't burn us, even if we don't use sunscreen it'll stay warm because there won't be any clouds. We wouldn't need to bring any towels we could lie down on the sand and none of it will stick to us. We can swim in the ocean and go out really far because you can't drown in dreams then the dolphins will play with us we could hold on to their fins and they'll take us for a ride. And the sun will never go away I could look right at it and not have to close my eyes the sky will be orange, red, and blue like when it's about to get dark but it won't get dark because it will never be nighttime and we won't have to wake up because we won't fall asleep. Thunder barks at me I hope it doesn't rain. The door let the barking get inside it's not the TV it's too loud. It didn't rain at the beach but it rained at the park. I push the waves off and open the door. The yellow light runs into my room Mommy's door is open, but she isn't in her room the barking gets louder when I move closer to the stairs my stomach freezes into an ice cube. The ocean never freezes not at the beach Mark wasn't at the beach. Nobody's sleeping in Mommy's room the bed is neat like when Jack made mine.

He sits on the stairs, holding his legs like a ball. He must be cold because I'm cold too. The beach is warm except when the clouds block the sun angry dogs got inside. Jack looks sad his eyes see downstairs and won't budge she barks loudly he barks in whispers. Loud whispers. Sometimes Daddy barks at me too when I don't work right then he gets sad and says he's sorry work is hard

I don't want to go to school with mean Trevors.

"Hey Pat." Jack stares at me. His eyes leak. I can't turn off tears not like the rain. There's nothing to turn.

"Hey Jack." Daddy cries too after he makes me work and I can't do it. The tears spill out of the door and get in my ears I can't shake them out. Nobody cried at the beach water washes tears away and the sun dries it all up. The sun doesn't paint the walls yellow it can paint the sky orange, but that's when it's going to bed or waking up. Water makes the sand wet so I can build a sand castle dry sand just falls I can't slip on wet sand because it's not ice. I should be in bed Jack hasn't made me go though he's just looking and listening. Covers warm me up and melt the ice. Too noisy to sleep loud angry dogs make me nervous and freeze my stomach but I don't want to sleep just get warm, like at the beach there the sun covered me like a blanket that wouldn't fall off. It's even warm in the ocean I can't swim out far or I'll drown. It's quiet underwater. All I can hear is me and the waves, but even they're softer under the water it swims all around me not like rain falls in drops I don't like the rain makes me wet except under umbrella-leaves getting wet in the ocean is fun not the rain. It covers my clothes in dark spots that make me cold that can make me sick so I need a jacket I don't like doctors they stick needles in me and take my blood to figure out what's wrong they give me medicine I have to take everyday one pink and half a blue. I don't feel sick, but I have to take them.

"Hey Pat?"

"Yeah?"

"Make 'em stop."

I have to make the dogs stop. Then me and Jack won't be cold anymore. Step. Step. Step. Careful Pat. Don't fall down the stairs. That would hurt. I reach up to pet the rocks little rocks in river water. But there isn't any water that would get the carpet wet. Light from downstairs pushes the dark up the stairs like a lighthouse. The front door is afraid to open it might get slammed again. I don't want to go outside it's dark and I could get lost my

ears burn with noise. The dogs are in front of the TV is on, but they aren't watching it they're watching each other. The firemen have to get the hose ready. I let go of the wall and move closer.

"This is bullshit," bad word, "Mark," Mommy shakes her finger at Mark like a bee that's going to sting. "You should be spending more time with me and the boys. If you cared about us, you would."

"Patti, shhhh, they'll hear you," Mark tries to whisper, but I can still hear him.

"Oh no, don't you even—

"Mommy, stop it!"

She snaps her head at me. Sharp white teeth poke up from behind her lip. Her eyes are big, but then they shrink to normal.

"Patrick."

"Mommy, stop fighting."

"Oh Pat, we're not fighting. We're just having an argument."

"Yeah. Just a noisy argument." Mark stares at the fireplace by the TV. There's no fire. It isn't snowing outside, but he keeps staring.

"It's late. You should go to bed."

"OK." Now I can get under the covers to warm me up. Melt the ice in my stomach. I don't want to go to school, but my eyes are heavy. Walking up the stairs, I hear Mommy and Mark whispering.

Jack hasn't moved. He doesn't move when I walk by. He's a statue.

"Thanks Pat."

I stop and turn around. He's still looking downstairs. He's following the whispers. "Yeah, thanks." I have to go to bed because Mommy told me to. I don't want to go to school and get into more arguments. I don't want Mommy to argue either, but she will. She argues with Daddy and Debbie and Mark and Me and Jack. That's why Jack has to stay. He only goes to bed when the dogs stop barking. So he'll stay there like a lighthouse because

lighthouses don't move at all, not even when there's a hurricane. When it's dark they just shine shine shine. It waits for day because the sun can block all the dark, not like a lighthouse. So he waits for day.

I can hear Jack crying.

But I won't in my dreams.

t a Wedding

lam Schoen

1.
Not that faith started the sun to roll over;
or the clouds furrowed up in purples;
from the hollow, the sky that pushed closer;
nor its promenade and shrug to brilliance. A whole other

slew of occurrences ensued then. As if by force of a healthy habit.
And this too was bound to give way to fits.
Like when thinking that everyone wants to hear your kid's
stories. New fathers carry a stone in their stomachs

which emburdens them an empathetic load, and which, after birth,
goes to their heads and makes them rattle. First,
it should be agreed upon that everything is old—in fiber and form.
Next, that this generous, rejuvenating process has given its word

to nothing, no promise. And, that to argue is to open a nasty
can of worms.

2.
“Weddings are a happy end to a damn-reckless absurdum,”
said her father to the priest. “Oh but indeed!
Yes, what a blessing children are!” nodding, replied the priest.

The father said “yes” then stepped away to rehearse his steps
before the family and guests arrived. His daughter in her dress

was at the same time the ceremony's floral, nature's lonely
spring unmatched,

and a spectacle, gowned in draping white, her figure an eglantine
on its head.

“Why are these people coming to this wedding? What's to see?”
the father wondered, why had he gone to weddings?

“By invitation, I guess.” And he practiced his steps as the guests
began to fill the parking lot. “It's time to greet them

as they come in.” He thanked and smiled at their congratulations
and each shook to welcome each with ambition. Then they rose
in congregation

and the music played. He took her arm and walked and gave
her away
then sat in the pew with a view of the window. The ceremony

finished as the tree branches bowed and, steadfast, the clouds came.
Soon it would be time for champagne. Birdseed flew, and
with the wind, came the rain.

Mexico D.F.

Horses lugged fat conquistadores
all about this space, gallofrumping
where now we can see no sky.

Mexico City, as the world's largest city
(give or take Tokyo and Seoul)
is the explicit beloved of many travel books
saying, "Its thick beauty can be partaken
in any one of its 16 districts.

Santa Fe: Financial and business district
west of the city gives a solider shoulder
to the airy, circumambient back
of the workforce and maquiladoristas
otherwise present. Polanco:

One of the wealthiest residential areas
with the most expensive boutique stores
in the city, filled with the upscale
restaurants, night clubs and hotels. The best

from elsewhere wait outside
their discotheques for droppings
from the haute hauteur. These are all whole,
part, and participle of one's experience.

All vistas of the city—
even the pockmarks on her face mark
a rich history of ardor and an overall
fitting fervor of life. All old souls live

here and you can taste them
(like the people do)
in the food: rice, eggs, beans
chased with beer and lime.

Laughing Wales

I could hardly remain still
reading Spanish Braille,
sensually curved, so much
more meant for the touch
than cold English.
I read hard German and cut my finger,
but it builds character, some callus
that you should wisen up. What doesn't kill
makes one smart, I assure you
it can't be any other way.

"Have fun
in the space between
dominant philosophies,
even leviathans must
come up to breathe."
The story's of an aquarium
where the soft blue glass
vibrated with the laughs
of whales rolling in the tank,
teaching the pupils that came to see.
See the dance of the water flections
on the glass, its wisped hair lets itself
in the wind and its very same move.
Where now, the pupils have some vibrance.

"Have fun
in the space between
dominant philosophies,
even the whales must
come up to breathe."

The Sackcloth of Hair

Oubacar N'Diaye

The women behind Fatou cackled away their ennui over cups of Moroccan black tea. She stood at the counter of the nearly empty Maliba after having eaten her plantain meal alone. It was the high afternoon, before the violet hour, and the dinner crowds were still at their work doing hair or sweeping Wall Street. The restaurant catered to the Malian émigré community that had sprung up in Harlem following independence. Fatou's parents hailed from Bamako but she had never walked that city's terracotta avenues. She was thirty and change, unmarried, and she possessed an angular face with full lips and a prominent forehead.

"Ya me?" the female cashier at the counter said in Bambara.

"Pardon?" Fatou replied in French.

"I te bambaraka me?" The woman continued still in the native language.

"Non, madame, je ne vous comprend pas. Vous parlez français, non?" Fatou responded.

"English?" the cashier proposed.

"Yes."

"It is ten dollars for the plate and the drink," the woman said and Fatou paid her. As she took her money, Fatou saw a glint of condescension in the woman's eye.

"Thank you, goodbye." The cashier flatly stated.

At this, Fatou turned around to leave. The laughing women lost their human and watched Fatou's tall, lean figure exit

the darkly lit eatery. When the door closed behind her, she heard the muffled sound of revived bonhomie.

She could not recall why she had decided to return to the restaurant. Surely word had traversed through the ears of the community and yet she'd thought the restaurant might have been safe from the tyranny of chatter and glares. She'd not thought she would care, but now thought only of the consequence.

Outside, a blanket of snow kept the concrete warm on West 116th street. Small storefronts and street vendors peddling the latest from Hollywood lined the cross street. The winter pall had made the city dark in early hours. It was not yet four o'clock and already most of the cars careened along the road with their bright lights on. The bumper madness hadn't started yet, tempering, for a bit, the usual din of outdoor New York. Fatou stepped into the whiteness with a mind to go north.

Under her thick green and white NY Jets jacket, Fatou sported a blood and vegetation colored Bazin fabric dress, the bottom half of which waffled in the breeze coming in from the Hudson. Her head was covered with a matching cloth wrap and her feet were lodged firmly inside a pair of mountain boots. On her shoulder, she carried a very large brown purse. From a distance, the eclectic mélange of colors against the snow resembled blots of spilled paint on a virgin canvas.

Fatou made her way to the border of the sidewalk to flag down a gypsy cab. An older Lincoln Towncar pulled up along side her not a minute later. The man in the driver's seat rolled down the passenger window.

"Go on the other side. This door don't work," he shouted from inside. Fatou did so. The driver was African. All of the gypsy drivers were African.

"Where you going?" he asked, not bothering to see who he was addressing.

"138th and St. Nicholas. How much?" she said.

"6 dollars, Miss," he answered, finally looking into the rearview mirror, "Oh, Miss Diabate, of course, 138th and St. Nick.

Yes, of course, I remember now.”

The driver, a mountainous man from Ethiopia whose body seemed an extension of the seat, had taken Fatou to the high rises on 138th before. His Michelin face gave away an amused expression. The left corner of mouth curled slightly upwards.

“You visiting your friend?” he asked her in a conspiratorial tone.

Fatou did not respond. She watched the moving images outside of her window, doing her all to avoid the gaze of the man at the helm.

Depending on the hour, the trip to the high-rise projects on 138th from 116th could take anywhere from 10 minutes to a couple of hours. Fatou’s cab, however, sped along St. Nicholas without delay. Ever since downtown developers realized that the neighborhood was in fact on the island of Manhattan, most of Lower Harlem now belonged to the renovated buppie brown-stones. The brick bourgeois lodgings ended around 125th Street, where the Harlem of old and fame reigned in the higher numbered streets and alleyways. Higher St. Nicholas at this time featured the usual street dwellers huddled over a subway vent and gaggles of uniformed schoolchildren heading home. Wooden panels depicting heroes and events in Black History lined most of the avenue. Those panels were for the most part covered by graffiti art and cheap imitations of Basquiat.

In her mind, Fatou played the times they had strolled along this way without aim. When they had lost themselves in the grid of Manhattan streets. She clutched her purse at these thoughts. She felt around for the hardback.

They reached the high rises a quarter of an hour later. Fatou paid the man his fee.

“You have fun, ok?” he said like a panderer to a john as she left his car.

The high rises consisted of four interlocking towers built two generations back to address the “negro housing problem.” The projects were still Section 8 housing and the regular rents had remained low. Fatou was headed to Tower Three, furthest away from

the street. She entered the first one only to exit into the courtyard. No one peopled the yard in the winter. The chess games and jump ropes were waiting out the thaw. She reached the designated tower with the hem of her dress drenched in melted snow.

Inside the building, spray paintings and the occasional Rorschach stain decorated the throw-up yellow-green walls. Fatou boarded the elevator and got off 10 floors later. To her left, the numbers on the doors rose, and she followed them. She knocked on the door marked 1138 and shot sidelong glances down the hall. A short woman with rounded curves covered by a waist wrap and a loose sweater opened the door.

“Oh, Fatou, rentre, quickly” Awa said, hurriedly ushering the taller woman in.

Jaundiced wallpaper covered the walls of the stifflingly heated apartment. Non-matching shrink-wrapped furniture and a mix of African and American kitsch filled the space. The open area was made up of a living room to the right and a kitchen-cum-dining room to the left. A window in the back wall looked over the courtyard.

Fatou entered and went to the kitchen table. She threw her jacket over the back of her usual chair and sunk into the seat. Awa followed her into the kitchen. A very large pot of rice simmered on the stove and Awa went to attend to it. Fatou did not acknowledge Awa’s two children, aged 2 and 3, who occupied the couch and watched a loud television show.

“Comment va tu?” Fatou asked Awa.

“In English, please, I’m practicing”

“How are you?” Fatou repeated.

“I am doing very fine thank you” Awa responded tentatively.

“I have your book, Awa,” Fatou announced while digging inside her cavernous purse. She retrieved a small but thick hardback book whose spine spelled *Le Rouge et le Noir*.

“Here, I did not like it.”

Fatou had greater ease with the language of the land. She was born and raised in Paris and had attended the University for a

year before coming to the U.S. Unlike most of the African women in Harlem, including Awa, Fatou resided in the country legally on an extended work visa which she put to use as a server in a restaurant downtown. Her late shifts gave her free days.

Awa was older but more beautiful. Brilliancy, uncommon naturally in black women, gave her face a beatific air. She was a registered nurse back in Mali but just a mother in New York.

"You did not understand it," said Awa as she stirred the soft rice.

"No, I understood very well that it is a bad novel, Awa," Fatou replied, looking at the television, "And your husband?"

"Still on business, Fatou?"

The question was a mere formality. Awa's husband had been away on business for 18 months, sending remittances for living expenses and the like. His business, Fatou knew, also included an American woman in St. Louis.

"Do you need money?" Fatou asked.

"Ca va, pour maintenant en tout cas," Awa said. "The Yassa sauce is finished. The rice is not done but soon if you wait."

"I am not sure if I'm staying, Awa."

"Early shift for work?"

"Yes" Fatou answered.

Awa stirred the rice and looked over to her children who were transfixed by the cathode ray tube.

"Awa? Awa?"

"Quoi?" Awa responded sharply, still not facing her.

"I...I don't..." Fatou fiddled with something in her bag, "Rien."

At times, their conversations were fluid and animated.

Other times, the silence of their voices would choke them.

"It's nothing," Fatou continued, "I am tired from work yesterday."

"You should go rest, then" Awa proposed while taking care to stir the onions in the Yassa. Fatou did not reply. The air about them had become stultifying.

"I had lunch at Maliba today."

"Pour-quoi?" Awa asked forcefully.

"The women in there, Awa" Fatou replied, "they were laughing"

"Donc, ils savent, tous?"

"I don't know if all of them know, Awa, but..."

"Attend...Dis rien."

Awa's demeanor had become visibly fearful. She stepped away from the stove and took a seat at the table.

"Comment?...I mean how did...?"

"I don't know"

"I cannot...Pas avec mes enfants"

"What are you saying?"

Awa put her top lip between her teeth and began to gnaw on it lightly. Fatou knew what it meant. Awa did this every time her husband would call. She would make lunch of her lip while staring at the vibrating phone. Fatou's eyes became glazed.

"Awa, look at me," Fatou demanded.

The tone had diverted the children's attention for a second. She turned to face Fatou. She freed her lip.

"You cannot come here anymore, Fatou."

"Non, tu ne peux pas me faire sa," Fatou said, louder than polite. The cacophony emanating from the television overtook the scene. The women said naught. Their manners had changed as well as the space they occupied. They no longer inhabited the same kitchen.

"You must go now and cannot return, Fatou." The statement carried with it the weight of a guillotine wedge blade. Her voice cracked around the consonants. Fatou felt as though a large grindstone had been pressed upon her chest.

"Je ne peux pas, please understand, je ne peux pas." Awa added.

Fatou rose from her seat, put on her jacket, and took a step in the direction of the door.

"Attend..." Awa commanded in French, "take this with you."

Awa went to a bookcase in the living room and returned with a book.

"C'est la poésie de Apollinaire. Tu l'aimeras. Je te promets," she said to Fatou, putting a collection of Apollinaire's poetry in her hands.

They stood now tête-à-tête, only an arm's length apart. The heat from the wall units caused them to sweat. A heavy passing cloud and the dying day turned the already ill-lit apartment darker. The women faced shadows.

Fatou abruptly crossed through the space between them and took a hold of Awa's waist with her free hand. Awa put her hands around Fatou's back. They inched closer together until there was no air between them and each breathed the other's exhalation. They struggled against the other's grip, tugging and pushing. Awa's children watched their dance with fascination.

Finally, after a minute or two had passed, the bloated dark cloud passed and a modicum of light returned. The women released each other. Breathing heavily, Fatou lingered in Awa's vicinity – her hand half way to the rounder woman.

"I'll go," she uttered in between pants "I'll go." Fatou staggered to the door and left. Awa hurried to her window.

After a minute, a green, red, and white shape appeared, making its way across the white yard. Awa watched the shape leave a trail of dark slush in its wake.

The sound of singeing water brought Awa back to her yellowy apartment. The pot of rice's water had boiled over. Awa took the pot off of the flame.

If I'm Silent

Christopher Rey Pérez

And when I pass
will you greet my ghost
like you used to grip my hand?
I am as much in blood
as a lost poem is an action,
your eyes (letting in another's luster)
are mine,

and as separation is
two worms curled into each other
as far as the space it takes to spiral
from the loftiest pyre in the Alamo:

whether it be Motel 8
or Resurrection Catholic Church,
the salt pit in which the town's sniffling lion sits,
or the fifth Xanax music bar played along a line on glass.

This town is this town as long as I am within this town.

When your Mary Kay pink telephone calls
for the cocoon that is my mute mouth
or the phonograph's twitching needle
I cannot roll out of bed to wrench,

I will have at least written,
"I breathed harder than the lion
could cry

and talked less
than it roared."

Piss Drunk

If I am acting, I am acting,
 but I will still peel blood oranges
& pin the rind

onto the wall across your bedroom
 each instance you spill sangria
on the kitchen table.

Every late tv night is an empty pizza box,
 every pizza box we empty is by your frameless bed
& the art left on paper plates is scrambled eggs

from the morning
 and ketchup smeared on my old jersey.
When you look at me,

I see two of you:
 pulling off your striped tube socks
& probably smiling.

With Any Luck

There are obtuse boys who play their saxophone
in the shower and dance with castanets around girls
like toradors. They think their mothers will rise
everyday of their life and they collect aluminum cans
so that they may one day buy their town's sunset.

The girls that smeared charcoal over their lips
when they used to masturbate in rain boots by red barns
now wear summer dresses that come above the knee.
They read to greasy-haired literary men
and catalogue their hormones into dovecotes.

We Really Should Be Talking About This War We Are In

Owen Davis

A soldier here in this foreign country: he is disoriented by heat and foreignness but things are all in all OK. He sees these three tan and squinting kids who don't play in or run across the brown grassy field in front of them like you'd expect some kids to do. The field stretches between the huge junk yard across the way and some squat ecru houses which these three boys sit in the shade of, watching the field. They're not playing or even making the pretense of wanting to have fun. This is a war zone. The distant gunshots are a dull soundtrack to daily local lives. And not that these boys seem concerned, really.

They see the white American soldier, alone, rigidly gesticulating military code things to some out-of-sight other soldier. He looks like he's going to cross the field, the way he's pointing and nodding. He stands tense and looming at the corner of the house along the dirt road to the kids' left. They look over their shoulders at his gesturing. They seem half-interested. He doesn't want to pass them and invade their space, but he knows he'll have to. He doesn't want to disturb this big silence that they seem to project over the field, a dirty, stagnant sonic sump in the immediate area of the kids.

And the kids: who knows their story? They grew up here and they're poor. It's safe to assume they're orphans. You might place their ages anywhere between eight and twelve. To the passing-by American soldier, who has now set out across the field in front of them for some unknown but decisive purpose, the kids are just bright white scleras, dark brown irises, pupils. Their clothes dirty and baggy. You see their photo in a magazine or a book and

you feel pity and guilt and the war-is-hell indignation every good civilian feels sometimes but out here for this long in this war with these people to this soldier they're just some eyes and who knows their story?

And the soldier can't help but feel the lumpy weight of their collective gaze as he passes in front of them. They let him know they're looking at him. He notes and resists the temptation to look at them directly. It feels to him like the vain desire to look at yourself in something reflective as you pass by it.

The junk yard across the field from the houses is huge, stretching in the yellow light hundreds of yards, maybe miles into the distance. It's impossible to tell. It has that multi-colored quality which few natural landscapes do, a speckled mesh of bright primary colors which makes it seem animated. The smell is simply awful. There's a clear distinction between plastic American trash and burlap-colored local trash, which fill the heap in equal parts, mingling nicely. All the plastic American goods that the invasion's presence has brought (goods probably manufactured closer to here than North America [e.g. India, Malaysia], then shipped to the USA for sale/processing but finally shipped back out here again to be feverishly consumed) find their way to a junk yard like this sooner or later: lampshades, GI Joes, air fresheners, holiday cards, scotch tape, potato chip bags, baseball caps, tiny candles, bird-shaped ornaments, etc. Some of the refuse is from soldiers' care packages sent from home, and since care-packaging has become an industry unto itself, the quality and quantity of the products sent out are generally corporate, like huge Wal-Mart grab-bags (literally), and the letters, while personalized, are all printed on the same paper in the same font with very much the same content regardless of the rank and age of the recipient. The rest of the American trash comes from relief organizations which tap into essentially the same food-and-sundries networks as the care-packagers, word their letters similarly on the same paper and font schemes, and use non-profit distribution lists to mail their relief-packages out to the stricken families of the war zone who consume and dispose of it all in their new American way.

It's amazing how everyone gets the same things. A week before today, entering the house of a local family whose patriarch had been blown up in a police station suicide bombing, the soldier

had seen a Garfield comic calendar laying dusty on the floor, its left-to-right date format inscrutable and meaningless to the family, as well as its decidedly Western view of cats, which for some reason holds them as lovable and part of the family. By absurd coincidence or mundane commercial homogeneity, it was of the exact make and model Garfield calendar as his Staff Sergeant's, whose family had sent it, appealing to the sergeant's deep love of cats. The calendar hangs above the sergeant's cot back in the barracks where it accrues less dust than everything around it—the calendar being regularly dusted off and carefully marked up by the sergeant—so in its shiny-papered, pastel-colored glory it looks like a religious icon, hanging above the bed as a crucifix might.

So a few yards into the lot and the soldier takes his eyes from the trash-strewn ground where Arabic and English-lettered products mingle peacefully together and relents to the kids' heavy gaze and looks agitatedly towards them. Their eyes drift and elude direct contact. Losing his attention for this one moment he steps on a land mine. It clicks twice and he hears the clicks and he immediately knows that the little click-click means land mine. He sees in his mind a brief elephant. Were he alive after the explosion to reflect on his last few seconds, he'd probably think about how they'd passed with such total abruptness that he has no time to panic. But there is no reflection, just a brief disturbance in the physical realm of things, and then the objects are again still and he's dead and still the kids stare, unmoved.

Here's the damage, which is atypical but not unheard of: the soldier's head has sustained just cosmetic damage, relatively, but it's disconnected from the torso by most of the neck. A few sinews or ligaments or whatever, little ragged red ropes of structural support, connect the head tenuously to the body. The torso has seen better days. Offal abounds. Left arm MIA. Legs resemble the heads of mops. He is in bad shape and dead.

So the three kids jump off their roost and run towards the splayed body. They hop over the mines because apparently they know where they are. The light from the sun adds strange brightness to their dull garments. They get to the body and stand over it, peering curiously at the damage, showing no apparent revulsion towards the indiscriminate gore.

The corpse in its divot is hyper-serene.

The boys pause over the body for a time, which could be considered reverent. The soldier's miraculously unharmed radio crackles short, distinct phrases of military argot. Soon the rest of the soldier detail will act on the radio silence coming from his direction and they will move to investigate. One of the boys breaks the silent inspection with a quiet command and some pointing; the other two boys grab hold of the former soldier's meaty limb-nubs and drag the body in a mine-avoiding zig-zag to the great junk pile.

The heap grows in height the farther you get into it. At times it towers high enough to give a militarily strategic view of the surrounding area. But a narrow canyon runs like an old face's deep wrinkles through the heap and into the fold the boys bring the body so they can have some privacy with it in their laboratory.

It's a fine thing that the boys have dragged off the soldier's body because the sergeant is indeed becoming suspicious of the soldier's radio silence, and he's begun the process of deciding whether to send a unit in to investigate the anomaly. He's been hanging back at the truck feeling tumid and ill-at-ease in the heavy heat while the grunts have been doing the sweep of the neighborhood. It's a routine exercise (the sweep) at an orange level of tactical complexity and danger. The colors range from white to red. Orange has a medium-hard tactical difficulty rating a risk of casualties in the <10% range. The sergeant scoffs at the ratings, though, because what use are they in the minds of his men other than to distract and confuse?

In fact, the sergeant always likes to delve into the psychology of war with his men. He had taken and enjoyed a psychology class or two in the academy, little of which he remembers as far as exact terms go, but his grasp of concepts is still fresh. In spare hours at the barracks he'd tell his men how to cope with the dangers and difficulties of being a soldier: "When you're in war, you have to not only distance yourself from the fact that you are in war—with all of its horrors and sacrifices and all that, you know, nasty stuff—but also you gotta retreat from the knowledge that you are self-conscious about distancing yourself from the fact that you are in war. I know that sounds complicated. But," he would say patiently, picking his nails with a knife, "it makes sense. See, the first distancing is definitely a battle, you telling yourself 'I'm not gonna worry about all this bad stuff out here.' But the second dis-

tancing, the subtler one, that's what makes you really removed and capable." He would adjust his position, moving his face closer to you if you were the one closest to him. "You know that you're in this war doing what's expected of you so you forget about all this terrible stuff you're seeing and doing in order to just do it without any qualms or second thoughts. But then you have to forget that you even had to forget it in the first place because that knowledge of forgetting acknowledges a set of compunctions that you must have had beforehand, and you can't have that burdening you." Blank stares, closed eyes. A few soldiers betting on how long he'll go on. He'd end with poetic flourish: "You wipe the slate clean then you throw the slate away and forget there was a slate to begin with because now you scrawl your messages in the dirt of the earth with the butt of a knife and leave them there to be scuffed clean by boot tracks." These would more or less be his words. The knife he'd be picking his fingernails with he would hold up as demonstration when he'd mentioned the knife in his diatribe. "But me saying this," he'd say in melancholy half-defeat, "shows that I'm still aware of both facts, so there must be more levels to it. But, you know, we really should be talking about this war we are in."

One of the soldiers would find the whole conversation very distracting and confusing, and it would remind him of the clever game he'd played in school where to win the game was not to think of the game. If you thought of the game, you lost the game; that was the game. So while watching TV or playing video games or riding the bus a friend would groan and say, "Fuck, man, I lost," and then everyone would have a grace period of a minute or two to get a running start again in forgetting it. The soldier would always devise methods of forgetting the game, as if his mind needed something to focus on in order to move its attention elsewhere, and inevitably he thought of an elephant stomping around somewhere. It seemed like a worthy distraction, a thing so big and physical and fleshy. He couldn't figure out when he'd first decided on an elephant, but it had always been an elephant, so that the thought of the game led through some neural synapse straight to the thought of elephant, the two thoughts now one in the same, and the elephant didn't help him forget the game at all because the elephant was a large thing and the game just a concept and now they were wed. He was terrible at the game.

Childhood found the future soldier terrible at many pursuits, actually. He wasn't popular in high school. He was mostly reviled. His was a frail, pimply and tactless adolescence. He'd had the awful habit of beginning every statement with a small snort, just discreet enough to go unnoticed in light banter, but intrusive enough to prevent any serious conversation partner from enjoying his company and thus coming anywhere near friendship. He'd played a decent cello but wasn't talented enough to know that he wasn't good in the higher musical sense. He'd done well in contests, though, because he was proficient technically, but that really only goes so far. He'd entertained notions of studying at a music school and going professional and his parents were all too supportive. But the real driving force in shaping his delusion was the fact that he'd loved his hip, young symphony director with a sincerity a few confused adolescent notches past platonic. A few months before graduation, however, the symphony director had unexpectedly laid it all on the table, as educators are never, ever supposed to do, with a series of truthful and devastating insights: you're not going to make it professionally; you'll never be "the best"; you're not even "the best" in your grade; you won't get into a good music school; your career as a musician would be relegated to teaching middle school students at best; you should spend more time on other subjects; don't you have any other hobbies or interests or friends?; Yes, I appreciate your friendship but know that I'm a teacher and you're a student and our relationship ends there; do you know that you snort when you talk? The future soldier took it gracefully during the conversation, but later that night—this by the way was at a graduation party hosted by the director, who enjoyed entertaining the seniors and his more precocious younger students—later that night the future soldier got drunk on some wine he'd found and he made a scene which made everyone nervous and embarrassed for him.

The next Monday he wore to class an official US Army t-shirt in gunmetal gray, his course set in mental stone regarding post-high school aspirations, and deep in the murky, self-loathing confines of his mind he knew that some day he would find his proper place.

Once the kids have set the former soldier's body into the clearing of the junk heap which comprises their laboratory, bub-

bling anxiety and excitement get the better of them (weird tense). They run back and forth around the lab, and upon getting to wherever they were running to they forget what they wanted there and run back to the body. They jabber and jibe and loudly declare things that no one listens to. They've lost all the stone-faced and business-like professional sheen they'd displayed back when they picked up the body in the minefield. There's a lot to do now and soon the sun goes down over the vast sea of objects that surrounds them.

At a glance, here are the three kids:

Kneeling at the body of the former soldier is the *de facto* leader who, to satisfy our appellative appetite, we'll call "Red" because of, why not, his shirt. He is the tallest of the three. He is intent on the body. They've placed the corpse front-side-up and arranged his uncooperative head to stay in place by wedging rocks underneath it. What limbs there are left are spread out as best as can be allowed. The gun has been laid to the soldier's side. Red is making tiny adjustments to body parts, getting his fingers a little bloodier than they were, new red blood on old, caked brown blood.

Bounding over a crushed office shelving unit is the kid we'll call "Little" for reasons that should be apparent. He has the look that if you were to guess his age you'd guess too low due to his stature and embarrass him right in front of his mother (but luckily that's not a concern) and although you'd known you were guessing too low, you couldn't bring yourself to believe that this Lilliput of a kid is really eight, nine, ten? Little is the busiest of the boys right now, but who can tell what he's accomplishing?

The third boy: "Azzam," which is probably his real name. Red calls him repeatedly as he squats with his knees to his chest and his chin on an elbow in one of those postures only a little kid can make look comfortable, using a stick to push a beetle in the sand away from the soldier's body. He has his back to the other two boys. He's got a bony, distended-stomach look that just screams malnourishment. Every dozen seconds he sniffs deeply, a sniff which causes him to throw his head back in an unwitting but dead-on pantomime of a supermodel blithely tossing her hair. "Azzam, Azzam, Azzam." Finally he turns to see Red motioning him over impatiently, so after one last prod of the stubborn beetle Azzam drops his stick and hops towards the body.

Red lets him know the score. He points to various body parts or places where body parts should be. Azzam sits again in that balled-up posture while Little fidgets, standing up then sitting down over and over, looking over his shoulder intermittently. Red gets angry with Little and tells him something that causes him to trudge mopingly away, holding his hands behind his back.

After a few more words, Red and Azzam begin whizzing about with a different air. They carry their chins like important professionals. Suddenly they have a real purpose again. They take little treks out into the vast empire of shit which cradles them in their laboratory, coming back with specially chosen bits of junk which they place next to the body of the former soldier. It's doubtful the boys know what they're picking up. Has Azzam ever used a phone with a spiral cord? Does Little have reason to have ever worn a shower cap? Would Red have any idea, could he read the packaging he's found, what an emetic is? Luckily, the boys are concerned not with the intended use of the objects, but for their utility in the boys' own still-nebulous designs regarding the soldier.

Here's a clue as to their designs, though: there are several other dead animals around the lab keeping the soldier company. Rats aplenty, in various stages of decomposition, some unfortunate birds, and, most notably, a fine, mangy, voluminous, orange half-cat. The other half, the half that's not composed of cat, is composed of things. The former cat's midsection has been reinforced, or partially replaced, by a section of black corrugated tubing which looks like it's from some kind of plumbing project. A missing ear is now a carefully cut and folded scrap of cardboard from the packaging of a Christmas snow-globe; the lettering "Holiday Glo-" can be made out, along with half of the globe. (The boys must have wondered what kind of thing had been in this box, a strange world in an orb, obscured in a pointless haze of white flakes.) A well-crafted chain of key-rings, all sizes, makes up the tail. On one bit of trash, you can clearly make out the words "33% More Girth." There are other parts of the cat that are harder to make out, but it all seems to have come from this vicinity here in the dump, of your standard American refuse. And somehow most of these animal experiments aren't decomposed as fully as you'd imagine. You might even call some of them peaceful if you were

feeling generous. But the smell, that's something else.

Little zips back into the clearing and looks around suspiciously. Azzam and Red are occupied somewhere else, scavenging. Little finds himself comfortably alone and safe, so he jumps his way over to the cat on the ground and pokes it a few times with his fingers. The cat remains motionless. Little picks up the front two legs, one of which is composed of the end of a broken golf club, and tries to get the cat to hop and dance. He doesn't get any kind of feline cooperation. When Red comes back in he gives Little a look that says, "This again?" and Little, with a few apologetic words, drops the half-cat. A marble eye pops right out. Red runs over and lets loose a verbal barrage on Little while fixing the half-cat. Then Azzam comes bounding in, pointing to the lab's entrance, screaming in a hoarse whisper something frantic and foreboding, one word repeated every sentence: Americans, Americans, Americans!

The sergeant is feeling the onset of something harrowing and unlikely. The news has already gotten back to him that his men have found out what happened to the wayward soldier (though they've not found the body; he could still be alive), and now they're bringing the sergeant their findings. Supposedly the Private's weapon is all they've got. There's a surprise he's been seeing coming for quite some time now, but in waiting the time keeps drawing out, and his awareness of the suspense has elongated and grown to become a suspense in itself. He chants a mantra under his breath as PFC Runk finally brings him the arm.

The arm of PFC Tegener. Tegener's left arm. Part of Teg's body. Jesus Christ, I thought they were bringing me a gun. Arms, arm, armed. Jesus. How could it happen? What was Teg doing out there? A land mine? But it's all very delicate. That arm. It's just clean come off. The bone looks so polished on the end there, very white. That's where it must have fit into the shoulder socket. If we could find that socket, we'll find—Tegener? What are you thinking about? Calm down, man. Of all the things you could do, don't hold the hand. That would be strange. Did Runk or somebody take the sleeve off or did the blast do it? Can't imagine what kind of force does that to a body. The rest of him: where is the rest of him? A trail of blood, they said? Oh, god. Keep your composure. Oh, god. Oh, man. Why the hell did I ask Runk to bring me the arm?

gets out of the passenger seat of the truck only to find Runk there again, sans third arm. "Sir, we want to take you to where—"

"Yeah, OK." The sergeant doesn't even want to know where the arm has been put. He's already in the process of forgetting about it and thinking about how he'll manage to forget about knowing he had to put it out of his mind in the first place. Something about this goddamn country—maybe the air, or the heat—gives him these headaches you wouldn't believe.

"OK," says the sergeant, "I'm ready. Tell me what you've found out since we last spoke."

Runk says, "Sir, we found the site of the mine blast, and it appears Tegener has been exploded." The sergeant winces. "All we found was the arm," (again a wince), "but there are footprints and a trail of blood leading south-east from the site of the blast into the junkyard of Sector 2."

"I know all this already."

"Well, sir, that's still what we know," says Runk. "We were waiting for you to give us the go-ahead on investigating the trail."

"Yes." The sergeant puts his hand on Runk's shoulder. "We'll all go." Runk stares up and to the left of the sergeant's gaze, and the eye contact the sergeant was hoping to make eludes him, and good riddance to that, he thinks, because what a humorless guy Runk is.

That's what the sergeant liked about old Tegger. He knew when to appear to laugh or appear to listen. Or to make direct eye contact when it was non-verbally requested, no matter how ill-timed and discomfiting it would be. Of course, the sergeant was uneasy and disoriented and needy like the rest of them, but it was nice to see Teg feel the same way so unabashedly. He'd made the sergeant look important and feel needed. If only his other eight men could be so obliging. But yeah, all that talk about his cello was a bit strange and obsessive, and the snorting thing was borderline-unbearable. But the kid was wholesome, in a way, refreshingly wholesome. And now the sergeant is down to eight-ninths of his men. The sergeant suddenly realizes that he hasn't said a single comforting word to his men regarding Teg's grievous probable-death. What should he say? He gropes for a memory or something moving to relate as he follows Runk to the junkyard where the rest of his men wait. He can only think of one moment with Tegener...

"OK, Jesus, Runk," the sergeant says, "get it away from me. Bring it to—" but the sergeant doesn't know what's to be done with a limb if the rest of the soldier is cannot be found. "Put it on ice," he says, handing the arm back to Runk.

"Where are we going to find ice, sir?"

"Ice? I don't know. 7-11. Heh."

Runk stares, unamused, holding the arm vertically with the hand pointing up. Rigor mortis has done a creepy and disastrously memorable thing with the fingers of the hand of Tegener. The sergeant tells himself that this will be the moment he remembers from today, if he remembers any, that the hooked, stiff fingers of the hand are tearing a mental scar in him right here as he wonders what to tell Runk what to do with the arm. He thinks that this will probably be the pinnacle of his future PTSD terror-show, Runk hefting that awful hand like a scepter. He wonders if thinking this will make the memory any more or less salient. He can't remember too well the PTSD section of the psych class he took at the academy. Is this even PTSD-caliber stuff? He hopes so. Not because he'd like to be afflicted, but because he can't imagine much worse than this image. Actually, no, he can. He can think of some stuff that's much worse.

"Runk," he says, "I don't know," and turns abruptly and walks into the truck and rustles with things, looking for who-knows-what, and he makes an awful din in there. Runk stands at attention for nearly a minute before going off to look for the next in command, bringing with him the up-stretched arm which stays in that same bent-finger position looking like it's trying to clutch whatever's between Runk and the sky.

Once he's settled down, the sergeant looks out the window of the truck to make sure big, meddlesome Runk and that god-awful arm are gone. Fiddling with his knife, he conjectures a series of futures that could logically follow this terrible present he's found himself stuck in. In none of these futures is there a victory for anybody. He wishes he had his tabby here with him to stroke soothingly. The sun is setting and it makes long irritating shadows which the sergeant wants nothing to do with. He isn't patient enough to watch the shadow from a nearby building elongate and elongate until it's eclipsed him and the truck, but he knows it to be an eventuality, and then he'll be stuck in here for sure, so he

Tegener had just found the Garfield calendar in the al-Amann home. Who knows how they got that same one, but there it was, just like the sergeant's. "Just like yours," Teg said with a smile so genuine the sergeant had to look away.

"Yeah," he said, "so it is."

Tegener picked the calendar up and dusted off all the grime. He took some time to read June's comic. He laughed loudly and turned the page. The sergeant couldn't help but feel the weird jealousy you get when someone tries to enjoy something you already know well and love, the feeling that's both a concern that they'll never appreciate it like you do and that they're somehow stealing something that belongs to you.

The sergeant couldn't make out the pictures from where he was—standing in the corner of the room where the newly-widowed mother of six was weeping and pawing at him—but he knew that July's comic, which Teg was poring over now, was one of the Odie classics. In the first frame, the dumb dog stands there like a monolith, drooling and wagging his tail; in the second frame, Garfield grabs the tail, trying to still its furious motions; in the third and final frame, instead of Garfield's paw halting the tail's frantic, probably Pavlovian gyrations, Garfield's body is thrown centrifugally outwards at a complete horizontal and is wagged ridiculously by the tail. The sergeant finds the comic's immediate humor in the absurd suggestion that a tail could wag a cat (and a fat one at that, Garfield being nearly legendary for his corpulence). But there is an extra suggestion in the comic of some kind of unexpected and deep personal connection going on between the two rival animals. That Garfield's goal of ending Odie's naïve and ingenuous joie-de-vivre is unrealized and in fact results in Garfield's silly final predicament; that Garfield's sinister and unkind intent leads paradoxically to his very embodiment of Odie's entire demeanor, symbolized in the wagging of the tail; that it's a classic good/evil paradigm here in the strip with unambivalent results....

The sergeant just can't focus on Tegener right now. And here are all his men, anyway, loitering at the entrance of the junkyard's corridor, keeping their distance from the mine-laden field. The sergeant looks into the dirt and sees the bloody drag-marks that whoever found Teg's body left behind. The marks are awful, like huge, dire calligraphy on the palette of the ground, like

open wounds on the earth's skin. The sun is low enough to allow the pebbles and flakes of paper and bits of plastic on the ground to cast visible shadows of their own, which makes the ground appeared textured in an organic, malleable way. The sergeant looks at his men's faces to find them all staring ground-ward as well. Returning his gaze to the brown-red blood trail he thinks, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and he wishes he could pick his men out of the dumps. "Let's find our man!" he cheers in an attempt at some heroism and optimism, but the hot air and wide field stifle the words, and in his mind's echo he feels that his voice sounded warbly and high and unbecoming.

The boys hear some American man's strange voice waver and waft into the junkyard's airspace, and after of a few seconds of strained silence they all speak at once. When Little speaks, his whole ribcage moves, the ribs almost independent of one another, undulating unnaturally. The air tastes like rust and plastic and human waste, and something in the distance is on fire, sending up a column of black smoke just north of the sun. When Azzam speaks, he ends each sentence with a grand sniff, like a long punctuation mark of great importance. Red stops to listen to the others talk over each other and after a minute or less butts in and silences them with his quiet but important-sounding statements.

After he says his piece, the other two take on a reluctant silence and move to do what he must have specified, to resume their reconstructive efforts on the soldier. Red's apparently not concerned with the possible advance of American soldiers they have just heard, that Azzam had earlier spotted at the edge of the junkyard. The other two affix objects, do quick little rudimentary surgeries, cover and clear and carefully arrange the corpse's parts. And Red apparently feels like he doesn't need to be a part of the project at this point, that his subordinates are properly equipped for the job, so he goes to a nook of the lab that no one has yet entered today. It's like an anatomical sac, a half-open organ in the lab, a place of obvious quietude and importance. The surrounding landscape's trash has been excavated to create the concavity, this comfortable nook within the larger nook of the lab itself, within the greater body of the junkyard.

The nook is well-furnished. A cinder block to sit on and some cabinetry of various plastic and metal boxes. He opens one

of the containers and pulls out a variety of photos from advertisements from magazines and the packaging of garments and similar items. Pictured are mostly white Americans and Europeans. Some pictures are celebrities a pop-culture-conscious westerner would immediately recognize. Others are models from advertisements, smiling their carefree and beautiful smiles with teeth and whiteness abounding. Red stares at each picture for a few seconds and the muscles of his face gently twitch to conform to each expression. He picks out a handsome man modeling for a Coach advertisement and holds it up to the body of the soldier, a few meters away. He closes one eye like a surveyor. Aside from having high-quality leather everywhere and the requisite number of limbs, the image of the striding model lines up pretty well with the splayed sight of the former soldier. Their one arm out at a slight angle, their other arm close in (or missing), their legs separated but close, their heads turned about 20 degrees from forward.

And just above the supine corpse and the rotated magazine clipping now comes into Red's sight the confused and alarmed face of a new American here at the entrance of the lab. He stutters and holds his gun out pointed at nothing. More Americans crowd him from behind. Little and Azzam freeze.

The sergeant had intended, with tactical brilliance, to lead his crew in with guns drawn, hardy grimaces all around. But word comes from Specialist Stern—who has spied the site from a tall crest of the junkyard—that it is just a bunch of kids, not a cadre of insurgents, and at a loss the sergeant walks into the clearing, still in a state of fear, regardless of the fact that they're just some kids.

Oh, but the sight is just terrible. The kids—he's seen these kids before, somewhere. They crouch unevenly, all waifish and anemic. What could they be doing to Tegger, crouched over him like that. The sergeant is prepared mentally for nothing.

Red doesn't move, just drops the ad a little bit so he can see the sergeant's entire body as it moves into the lab's space. He begins to rotate the ad slowly back to its natural vertical and lines it up with the sergeant. He squints and shakes his head; not a match.

The sergeant moves in closer, still keeping mum. The soldiers behind him don't know what to do. The sergeant is the only one with gun drawn. The light is dimming and the yellows

and browns that cover everything here—on the ground and on the clothes and somehow in the air, everywhere in this country it seems—all the yellows and browns are retreating and the blues and violets of dusk are coming in. But there's this uneasiness at this moment of the course of the day when the colors meet and mingle poorly like disparate, heterogeneous elements.

When the two boys over the body stand up and move back (and then the tiny one sprinting away to bound over the complex topography and uneven footing of the trash heap), the sergeant sees Tegener's body. He lets out a pained little moan.

There's his face, still his face, nothing wrong there, still that dopey look there, but on his neck—there is no neck now—where his neck should be there's some kind of something—a deflated basketball's skin? But, oh, there's the left arm. It's a baseball bat affixed by way of garden hose and a latex glove filled with something lumpy for a hand, and there's some old linen covering the shoulder festooned with images of Santa and elves and Christmas trees. Where the distal segments of his legs should be: on the right a large brass lamp's cylindrical base, on the left a few legs from a table bound by rubber tubing and, oh, the torso. Where did it all go? Of all the unlikely things: a television, a small, portable, built-in-VHS, 9-inch-screen, broken, browned, cracked, dusty television screen in the middle of Teg's ruined torso.

With a sigh, the sergeant becomes aware that yes, Teg is indeed dead and—

What's that?

The sergeant sees, just a meter or so beyond the soldier something he just can't handle: the old dead, monstrous, mortifyingly grotesque tabby half-cat. And now his mind is pushed a notch past self-control, and his finger, for just a quick thoughtless moment, shudders and tenses over the trigger, and his eyes stop seeing anything but the half-cat in the rubble and trash, his sight narrowing and dimming peripherally so that it seems like he's passing through a narrow, dreadful tunnel whose terminus is the half-cat, bulging and terrible and elephantine in scope now. But then the moment's over and he relaxes and lowers the gun and thanks God for his mental stability in times of crisis. The taller boy emerges from the corner with a piece of paper in his hand and gestures to the corpse on the ground. He looks directly into

the sergeant's eyes. The kid doesn't move, but takes on the dual looks of both knowing he's done something wrong and learning that what he did thinking to be right was actually wrong, which is drastically paradigm-shifting in the mind of a kid.

The sergeant wants to go and hug the kid, or pat him on the shoulder. But his men...and the cat—it doesn't feel right. He tells the taller kid, "Shoo." Big, blunt Runk strides towards the kid and stands over him with obvious menace. The kid runs away and the remaining one follows him. Runk turns and says that he knows these boys, that he always sees them hanging around the medic's tent down in Sector 3, and that the medics have to kick them out every goddamn day for being so pesky and stealing shit. The sergeant says that yeah, he knows.

The sergeant really doesn't want to think too much right now. He has to remind himself that we were all once children. And although he can't remember his childhood too well, he knows he was never doing this kind of awful stuff. He tells the men to take care of all of this. It's just a case of misplaced things, after all, objects out of their proper place.

And the three boys run off in their separate trajectories across the limitless expanse of the junkyard, lit weakly now by a waning moon, the three boys like drops of water coursing down the back of an animal too large to notice.

Nonsense

Dave Luciano

There's a digging
between my shoulders' slope, stretching down
in a peak towards
the top of my belt,

the center, a finger forever
rubbing deeper in crusted, wet sand,
the bottom of my trachea
down to the lowest bowel.

In a salty, shallow ditch,
there is a realization
these disparities are gonna merge,
in a tyranny of possibility.

I'd want to classify the torso,
continue picking mustard-colored scabs.

See if a faux pas will do me in,
rob what I had to learn to love close—
that one is up above an aorta,
and grooves down to one hip.

Scrape now to the right—
witness two trajectories
met in the middle,
one soaring off the moldy page grain,
the other
dropped dead.

I'll allow this surgery,
'see you through',
supply the momentum
that I can.

Except I know
and you don't
white wrapped-sheet queen:
that as the finger strikes black

bubbled foam will arrive
(as always intended)
wetting my nape
where the oil hasn't.

Staring at the Face of God Through a Telescope Lens. A review of *Quiver* by Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

Ryan Bender-Murphy

The relationship between poetry and science has always been a Romeo and Juliet love affair. It may even be said that each group thinks the other speaks a highly jargonized language. However, between the figurative language of poetry and the taxonomic categories of science, there survives a healthy literary tradition that reconciles the two through their many relevant and beautiful resonances.

Susan B. A. Somers-Willett's second collection of poems, *Quiver*, illuminates these resonances using the theme of love and all its connected ideas of sensuality, romance, and power. It dives deep into the scientific realm, fusing the facts of history and personal observation with lyricism. Somers-Willett tackles a multitude of issues about how human beings perceive science, the natural world, and the relationship people have with both. The speakers in these poems are sensual, romantic, and trying to understand their environment. In this way, *Quiver* not only explores an abstract world of theories and technical ideas but also emotionally—concretely—transports them into the emotional and spiritual realm. The book begins with an epigraph from Wassily Kandinsky: "It is clear that the choice of object that is one of the elements in the harmony of form must be decided only by a corresponding vibration of the human soul." Indeed, Somers-Willett makes explicit "the human soul" in a field that has never quite acknowledged it.

People have placed the fathers of modern science on a pedestal, and to a large extent have been unwilling to make

such figures as Gregor Mendel, Charles Darwin, and Robert Oppenheimer, truly vulnerable. The sometimes dehumanizing effect of history is often amended by artists, and Somers-Willett plays this important role of revealing science's coolly distant figures as nothing more, but also nothing less, than human. *Quiver* is a work of not only empathy, but real intimacy. Somers-Willett sets out to expose and to expand on what it means to be a person caught up in the discipline, in a field of study that may seem sometimes emotionally void. She mixes narratives with persona poems, engaging science on the infinite and infinitesimal scale. Her personal poems are raw and honest and her long romantic narratives demonstrate how Science possesses her own peculiar sensuality.

Quiver is broken into six sections, most of which are named after some scientific idea or theme. But, while many of the subjects are rooted in the realm of science, romances and love stories are extrapolated from them. Hence, the first section, "Dark Matter: A Love Story," explicitly states its romantic theme. The section is a long poem about the love affair between the personification of "Dark Matter" and a man who after hours of observing her, falls in love. The apparent disjunction of this unlikely pair, is sensually, and seamlessly fused:

his elemental data shifting in the black
waves of the graph into her indefinite
shape into her sound--

his love a burning cluster:
supernovae

his love collapsing in on itself.

The fifth section of the book, "Radium Music," has a similar theme of romance. This section examines the love affair between Marie and Pierre Curie. The speaker in "Love as an Aid to Hypothesis" reveals the physical relationship between Marie and Pierre within

the context of their scientific studies of radioactivity. Somers-Willet crafts, with a scalpel's concision, rich imagery in lines like:

If the element is radioactive, then it will
illuminate the new husband down to his gentle bones.
He will not know it, but such work will make his body
open as the field in Brittany in which he and Marie
first made love, tumors softly knuckling
in his side, in her side, exposed.

Looking at other poems in this section, the first poem, "Radium: Serenade," states how "the public took" these x-rays of body parts as "a sight" into "the domain of God." Whether it is to unravel the core qualities of a lover, or to stare down the face of God, in both cases the speakers demonstrate that intellectual hunger and sensual desire are not mutually exclusive in their shared quest to uncover the mysteries of life. In the notes following the poems, Somers-Willett mentions how Marie and Pierre sought a connection between spirituality and science. Radioactivity provided them a glimpse into the internal, areas "of God"; thus, while this section reflects on the relationship between Marie and Pierre, it also reveals humanity's love for power, which comes from a love to know everything "down to" its "gentle bones."

In another section, "A Natural Order," Somers-Willett examines the hierarchies established in nature and the parallels between plants, animals, and human beings. One notable poem, "The Order of a House," uses the conceit of the lives of bees and how their society is arranged in order to make a concrete comparison to how people interact with their environment—

The queen delights in twisted wax and mud
and thrown-up paper and in winter
clips the drones' useless wings. There is nothing

they will not do for this woman. They make

their curious lives trying to make a voice with their wings,
and to stumblingly dance, and to dance ornately,
and to do as they are told all the way home

like you, the child who lived in this house,
or like the stuffed bear you wouldn't leave home
without—
you buckled him in the backseat next to you,

his urgent gold plush worn to buds,
his misshapen head turned toward the window
as your mother drove you all over town.

Echoing in theme the section's title "A Natural Order," this conceit elucidates its revelation of perpetuity—the queen is like the child is like the mother. From smallest to largest, each being creates a fixed relationship with that which preceded them. The "queen" keeps her hive-dwelling bees, the "child" keeps his "stuffed bear" and the mother drives the child "all over town."

Throughout the book, human individuals—through science—strive after an elusive (perhaps illusory?) power over nature. It is not only matters of love, but also matters of power, that this book engages. That Somers-Willett chose her overarching trope in the verb 'quiver'—a sudden, small and almost delicate movement—feels apt and true. In science and in love, many of the greatest discoveries are often small and imperceptible. A lot of the poems have images of matches or fire—a flame's flickering is itself a kind of quiver—and also of individuals controlling movement. In "Dark Matter: A Love Story" the speaker notes:

To wish to be spectacular

like an unlit match imagining to burn
or the spent match remembering its burning:
want flying over its pale wooden body
all acetylene brightness and rough sound—

These images of fire, as Somers-Willet conceives them, capture a world in constant flux. Perhaps the greatest conflict within a human individual is the desire to control or harness these changes and movements.

Where *Quiver* shines is in its depictions of relationships, and this is uniquely wrought “My Natural History,” which is a kind of personal narrative. The speaker tells the story of her origin by recounting the love story of her mother and father. Framed like the geographic history of a species, she takes the large idea of humanity’s origin and reveals the single and singular organism that is the love of one’s parents. Weaving romance and geography, she writes:

The rocks push through layers of sediment and he
crosses the pale borders of shale plates and limbs,
a mountain rising in her hip and his future
spiraling in a fossil of white shell. The water
is rising up to run its dark course:
the water will wear her form for years.
As the gap yawns wider, it is this history
he chooses to remember:
a young woman, not even twenty,
reclining in the grass and the distance.
The blade of a river flowing between them
in which their daughter is being carried away.

The images in *Quiver* are always surprising, and often visceral. In “Zero: A Meditation,” Somers-Willet describes the “beautiful archipelago / of a dead man’s dress shoes in the closet.” And, in “The Order of a House,” the bee is “ripping its poor weapon from its body / like a soldier already impaled and dying.” Though these images are vivid, the poems glean their multi-dimensionality and depth from a layer of biographical and historical facts. The previous poem in the section, “Horses,” gain a new facet of meaning in Somers-Willet’s endnotes which state the cause of Pierre’s death as a horse-and-carriage accident. Suddenly, the

small and simple memory of horses eating out of her father’s hand carry a tragic and prophetic weight. There is in this poem that bears special mention for the way it mimics those quick, sudden and delicate movements the word ‘*quiver*’ evokes: “The rain: the hoof: its quick: the strike: the light: a shroud: the black of the shield.” It is not only at the level of narrative and imagery that the concept of “quiver” is realized, but it’s as if the poems themselves contained these tiny tremors within the lines, the words and its individual sounds.

Science—the field of knowledge and even the word itself—invites a sense of certainty, and its facts, discoveries and theorems persuade all of us of natural truths. By the same token, artists make similar claims to a greater understanding of our world. Somers-Willet acknowledges both these means of knowing and, through her keenly sensual observations and by the lyricism of her language, essentially marries them together. Between hard data and human gesture, between understanding molecules and apprehending the soul, this book is conceived from that improbable but ultimately harmonious pairing.

Breaking the Birdcage: An Interview with Dean Young

Ryan Bender-Murphy

Ryan: In your books you refer to Kenneth Koch, and in *First Course in Turbulence*, you wrote a poem after him. So I was wondering, in general, what do you take from him?

Dean Young: He was enormously resourceful in the way he put poems together. He made very different kinds of poems. And there's also a sort of beauty and charm that I like about his work a lot. People often think that his work is often being only comic—there's a lot of darkness and there's a lot of sadness in his poems. But there is this kind of energy, which often employs disjunction, but the disjunction is often energized through a kind of hyped-up personality—he's never sour. When you read his poems you think, "Hey, a poem could be like a party." He's a very celebratory poet. There aren't that many poets like that—there aren't that many poets that sort of bring us good news. Whitman is a poet that brings us good news, but there are few and far between.

RBM: I remember the one poem I read that I thought was amazing—"Alive for an Instant"—where he had the line "Tigers in my genitals" and I was like "I didn't know poetry could do that." And I recently read your book *Primitive Mentor* and I remember the first line of one of the poems was "I have a big erection."

DY: Oh that's that poem to Tony Hoagland.

RBM: What poem from Tony Hoagland inspired that one?

DY: There wasn't actually a poem for that; I was just trying to get back at Tony because of a poem he wrote called "When Dean Young Talks About Wine."

RBM: I remember reading that in *What Narcissism Means to Me*.

DY: Yeah, which is a good poem. But it's completely false. What actually happened—Tony is afraid of anything that seems at all sophisticated, he purposely misspells sophisticated as a way of distancing himself from that—we were at a restaurant with somebody else—and I had lived in California for years—and I asked her what kind of wine she wanted and she said red and I just asked her some questions about whether she wanted a full-body wine, if she wanted something lighter. It just flipped Hoagland out that someone he knew would know the basic particulars about that.

RBM: To have a level of sophistication?

DY: Yeah, like knowing how to tie a tie, or something like that—it's just so outrageous for Tony. So anyway, this exchange of poems has been a badminton game going on between us for a long time.

RBM: I noticed in a lot of your books you thanked Tony Hoagland and there is that sort of discourse. What sort of relationship do you guys have in the poetry world and outside of it?

DY: Well we're best friends. And we've been best friends for a long, long time. He's a very different writer from me. We have very different sensibilities, and we see each other fairly often and argue.

RBM: What are your sensibilities, how do you approach the poem, what are the stages of the craft?

DY: I sit down with a blank notebook in front of me and start trying to write. And something either begins to appear or something doesn't. If something begins to appear then I sort of elaborate on it or stretch it out, shrink it. I keep writing it over and over again until I feel like I have a beginning and an end—and that, it sort of holds together. So basically, my process involves the actual writing. I never think of writing separate from the actual writing. It's very rare for me to get an idea for a poem. All the ideas for the poems come from stuff I've written down. So I try

to write everyday—I haven’t been able to do it lately because a bunch of stuff has been going on—in the mornings. My head is pretty empty. And if I have a word or two, or a phrase, that’s great, because it gives me something to start with.

RBM: You say you find them within your writing, but I’ve noticed that there are a lot of themes with these taboo subjects—you know, like the “big erection”—or subjects that people don’t normally write in poetry. Do you find yourself drawn to these subjects because they are taboo or do they just come up through this process?

DY: Well I think poetry can do anything, anything language can do. Poetry can do everything that fiction does, it can do everything the essay does, it can do everything people screaming at each other do. So it’s sort of constantly a search for materials that, when they come into your work, they have a particular kind of charge, and sometimes they have that particular charge because it seems that they shouldn’t be written about, or that your violating decorum or taste or something. And when that happens the thought is good.

RBM: You mentioned Walt Whitman, and he had the “Dalliance of the Eagles” and everyone felt that wasn’t something you could write about. I see that sort of connection in your work.

DY: Yeah, it’s not like you sit around and try to think about what nobody else has ever written, because you are going to sit and think for a long time probably. It’s just a question of making things available—finding them—and then not shying away from them.

RBM: There’s an interesting line in Embryo—“in ‘Paradise Poem’—which says ‘I’d rather spend an hour with a dying squirrel than tour a cathedral.’ What does that mean to you, what’s the importance?

DY: It’s just a statement and it seems relatively unexpected. It’s true to me: that I would rather spend time with a dying squirrel—because there’s something primal there, there’s something basic about life. And a cathedral has some sort of basis of life, but it’s highly mitigated by expertise and mastery—not that that kind of beauty isn’t extremely important. But, in terms

of the revelation of what it is to be alive and what constitutes life, I think you’d find out more from the squirrel.

RBM: I remember in another poem where you say something about having the house in Berkley, and how you would want to go out there with the muddy sandals and find the rattlesnakes. It just seems somewhat counter-intuitive that, of all things to do in Berkley—this high education, cultural center—you want to go out and find the rattlesnakes.

DY: Yeah, I don’t live there anymore. I love Berkley. The thing about Berkley is you can go out and find rattlesnakes in parks. And the parks are very close—I could definitely walk from where I used to live to a place where there’d be rattlesnakes.

RBM: Would you be like that kind of person who has the cabin up in the woods and still kind of close to the city?

DY: No, I am not an outdoorsy kind of person. I need coffee shops to survive, I like sleeping on beds, and I really like having a washer and a dryer.

RBM: [laughs] You wouldn’t want to wash your clothing in the pond?

DY: No, no.

RBM: In the very lovely poem “Sex With Strangers,” where you have sex with Eleanor Roosevelt, this is an intriguing line: “One reason to have sex is to help a stranger get in touch with his or her animal being.” What is the importance of knowing the animal being, do people really want to know if they are a crayfish?

DY: [laughs] Well, I think it has to do with the feelings of the pervasiveness of cultural detachment, where people have repressed the basic drives and basic urges and those things become so mitigated that desire is expressed for cars and a bigger house rather than getting in contact with the more primal way of going about things—and one of the ways to do that is through sex. I think—I don’t know.

RBM: Being a human—is that detached from being an animal, or

is there some sort of resonance between the two?

DY: Oh absolutely. A human is an animal. We are animals—we have some differences, we have language, but we definitely are animals. The more we deny that the more we're just sort of struggling on—people struggle with what to be, the more disconnected we get from the environment—the more disconnected we become from a different kind of value system that's not based upon materialism.

RBM: Whenever I read your poems there is a lot of subject matter that goes into it, there are a lot of things. I remember one poem that started with "You're a toilet head" and then somewhere along the line we learn about the moose. With these sorts of references and twists and turns, what do you want to accomplish, what do you want people to get out of these poems?

DY: Yeah. I don't really know what I want people to get out of my work. I don't really think that much about it. I just want to make it. And sometimes the poems are kind of direct, and other times they're just pretty wacky. That poem you're talking about, "Gawker," I was actually trying to ape a student of mine, his way of doing things, because it struck me as so strange, and kind of wonderful. I don't know, what does anyone expect to get out of any art—maybe some companionship, maybe a little diversion, maybe a sense that you're not entirely an isolated consciousness in this world. I don't know. I just don't think that much about audience.

RBM: So there's not really like that "internal audience" when you sit down, you don't think: "oh, Tony'll read this, and what will he think?"

DY: If I would think those things, I think that all they would do at this point for me would be impediments. You know, it is very important sometimes in writing to really consider the experiences of an audience, so that you can at least come to terms with some notion of accessibility—so your work isn't entirely private. But at this point, I've been doing it for so long, I'm amazed that people read my poems, and what they get out of them, who knows?

RBM: For me, I just love the energy you put into it, the topics—

like I said, I didn't think you could write a poem about the "big erection," but I mean, it's also more than just taboo subjects. There's a certain musicality. In some of your poems you propose this argument—or not even an argument, but like a fact—and then the poem goes off with these images that go with the fact. Do you find the musicality, do you see a lot of music in your poetry, like how it crescendos?

DY: I pay attention to musical events in poems. And that's also what sort of leads me in poetry, and then I'll get to that place, which came about through the repetitions of sounds, and then I'll become aware of that as a kind of subject, as a kind of "what it's saying"—instead of how it's saying—and then I'll react to it, I'll say something back to it. I talk to my students about this: you don't really intend a poem to be anything, but you attend it. So, you've written a few lines, and you look at them and say, "This is going one way, and I could do this, this, and this." And that happens, and then you respond to it. Even though you start with a blank page, it's all almost always as if there's something already there. And you're in stage of reaction, you're in a stage of awareness and paying attention to it—and that's what you work with it. And one of those awarenesses is a musical awareness. And music and poetry have authority—music is truth. And in the same way, rhyme makes things true. If things rhyme, we have a tendency not to question their content, because they're rhyming. That's something that Koch did very very well, his use of rhyme. He often did it for primarily comic reasons. But, it establishes a kind of authority, which is not rational.

RBM: Do you ever consider, given the rhyme, to do formalist techniques?

DY: Well, you know a lot of my poems actually—no one ever believes this—rhyme. They just don't rhyme with regularity, in a fixed prosodical manner. I've written some sonnets. I have one in the new manuscript I put together, which I'm taking out. There's something about a very fixed structure that doesn't interest me. Either to try make it or try to put something in it—neither of them particularly speak to me. But rhyme, musical events—I find that very inspiring.

RBM: How do you go about guiding other people who want to

write, what is your advice to poets that are sort of building their career—or not even a career, just sort of building their craft—because “career” is such a bad word to use for poetry?

DY: Yeah that’s a good word to avoid. Well, it’s very different teaching graduate students than teaching undergraduate students. With undergraduate students, I think it’s very important to provide some criteria of evaluation and have that criteria make sense and be consist. With graduate students, the assumption is that they already are committed and involved in their work with a level of sophistication. And as a teacher, what I try very hard to do is recognize what it is they’re doing and then talk about ways in which that can be developed, ways in which they can move beyond that, do other things—all ways of enlarging their possibilities as a poet. So, it’s mainly looking at their work, describing its accomplishments, and describing places where it perhaps wrecks those accomplishments or endangers those accomplishments—but not thinking of those places as mistakes, rather they may be places in which the person is trying to write a poem her or she does not know how to write yet. So, it’s much more sort of growing out of the work with graduate students, because of this investment and sophisticated relationship.

RBM: I was looking on the course list for graduate students and noticed you had a workshop, but in the description you didn’t want to call it a workshop, you wanted to call it a laboratory. Is “the laboratory” the idea that students are not here to chisel out the hits, or any one sort of UT aesthetic?

DY: Yeah, it’s not a workshop, people aren’t hammering on things, knowing what they’re going to make. We all know what everyone’s trying to do is write a poem. But how you define a poem, there’s a lot of different ways of doing it. If you get stuck in one way, you’re going to really limit your capacity. Because Emily Dickinson poems are really really lousy Walt Whitman poems, and Walt Whitman poems are really really lousy Emily Dickinson poems. So you can’t come up with this single standard—you have to be fairly fluid. It’s not like we’re all getting together and we’re all going to make birdcages, where we all have the same material. “Workshop”—that word is very very misleading, and the whole notion of “craft” is misleading, because “craft” implies that there

are a series of skills that can be passed on, and the idea is primarily one of replication, rather than creativity and imagination.

RBM: So, for everyone that writes, you don’t want to have just one style, you want to be fluid?

DY: You’re always changing, you’re always moving. The worst thing that can happen to an artist is that they become complacent, and just repeat the same thing again and again and again.

RBM: And have you ever had a student or just anyone where their style is something that, maybe just for you, is hard to get a handle on, or hard to understand?

DY: Oh absolutely, absolutely. And, it just requires a certain amount of openness—it’s a conversation. It’s not like I’m the expert, they bring their stuff to me, and I judge it—that’s useless. Sometimes it just requires patience. I’ve had students who it wasn’t until halfway through the semester where I really began to figure out this is what this student is doing. At that point, the conversation gets much better. But yeah, that happens, not infrequently.

RBM: And then, how much do you say that you learn from your students from their work?

DY: Well, it’s hard to say. It would be hard to say how much I learn from any poetry. I don’t poach my students the way I would poach my books I read. So my relationship with my students’ work is different than when I sit down and read a book by William Carlos Williams or something. I’m sure it has some kind of influence—I know it has influence on the way I think about poetry, and the way I think about poetry has an influence on the way I write poetry. But I don’t know if it’s a direct influence. Every now and then, there is a student who really affects and I’ll see that affection in my work.

RBM: This is the easy question, how are you enjoying Austin? How is it different from other places?

DY: [laughs] Well I haven’t been to that many other places. I like it a lot. It’s a fun city. I was nice not to have to go through

an Iowa winter. I miss the Bay Area, I miss the Pacific Ocean and the particular beauty of that place. But this is where I am. Great food, really great food.

RBM: Have you had the Tex-Mex?

DY: Yeah. That's just where I'm at.

RBM: Have you invested anytime in the local poetry scene?

DY: No, I've been really just trying to get the lay of the land here, and work with my students, and get my teaching together here—you know how it is when you go to a new place. I just bought a house. I guess the Austin Poetry Festival is something that I am going to be giving a reading at. But I haven't really gotten out much.

RBM: Well, I think that will work for the interview.

DY: [laughs] I hope it's useful to you.



RISTOPHER RAY PERÉZ
INNY MEYER
TT INGEBRETSON
LY BOLT
GGIE HILKERT
ECCA LIENDO
RIS MCGILLICUDDY
AM SCHOEN
DUBACAR N'DIAYE
/EN DAVIS
/E LUCIANO
NATHAN YORK