

thin air  
magazine

aesthetics 2001

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2001

Volume VI Number 2 2001  
Northern Arizona University

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8 x 10 inch black & white photograph  
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*Thin Air* is a non-profit magazine published bi-annually by the Graduate Creative Writing Association, in cooperation with the English Department of Northern Arizona University. Our submission period is from September 1st through May 1st. The editors welcome submissions of stories, poems, essays, and visual art.

All submissions should be accompanied by s.a.s.e. Submissions from other countries should be accompanied by a sufficient number of international postal reply coupons. Please query before sending book reviews and interviews.

*Thin Air* has an annual contest, send s.a.s.e for guidelines, or visit our website: <http://www.nau.edu/english/thin-air/>

Address submissions and subscriptions to:  
*Thin Air*  
P.O. Box 23549  
Flagstaff, AZ 86002

2001 *Thin Air* ISSN 1099-0380  
Vol. VI, No. 2 (Issue 11)

The incompatibility of aquacity with the erratic originality of genius.  
-James Joyce, *Ulysses*

We join ourselves to the living world by the artifacts of art and science—by made things.  
-Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle*

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, symmetry, or anything else I ever heard of.  
-Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper*

The parts that embarrass you the most are usually the most interesting poetically, are usually the most naked of all, the rawest, the goofiest, and the strangest and the most eccentric and at the same time, most representative, most universal, because most individual, most particular, most specific, vomiting out a piece of liver, specific situation, smoking.  
-Allen Ginsberg, *Composted on the Tongue*

1. Take prosody off the hit list.
  2. Stop calling formless writing poetry.
  3. Accuracy, at all costs.
  4. No more emotion without narrative.
  5. No more meditating on the meditation.
- The Reaper's "Non-negotiable Demands"

Poetry is the alchemy which teaches us to convert ordinary materials into gold. Poetry, which is our relation to the senses, enables us to retain a living relationship to all things.  
-Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future*

A painting of a rice cake does not satisfy hunger.  
-Dōgen, *Moon in a Dewdrop*

The object of science is the universal that contains many particulars; the object of art is the particular that contains a universal.  
-Will Durant, *On Philosophy*

When we have mastered the internal word, when we have vividly and clearly conceived a figure or a statue, when we have found a musical theme, expression is born and is complete, nothing more is needed. If, then, we open our mouth and speak or sing...what we do is to say aloud what we have already said within, to sing aloud what we have already sung within.  
-Benedetto Croce, *Esthetic*

...the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or lime, drop by drop, into atomic words.  
-Langston Hughes

Poetry as the skilled and inspired use of the voice and language to embody rare and powerful states of mind that are in immediate origin personal to the singer, but at deep levels common to all who listen.  
-Gary Snyder

fiction	Sea Horse Redux Alex Campbell	64
	Boxes Frances W. Burch	54
	The Dwarf Richard Krause	27
	Conjure, Baby Virgil Suárez	18
nonfiction	Victor Daniel John	12
poetry	Umbra #093 George Gott	53
	Jesus in a Fish Tank Nora Edwards	11
	Reasons for Neck Bones Michael S. Smith	69
	Bear on a Bar Stool Virginia Schnurr	10
	Our Lady of the Spirits Alan Catlin	26
	Naked, Naked Sisters Mary Winters	16
	Handing it Over Megan Riley	36
	Busting Out Earl Coleman	41
	With Mermaid Mandoline Whittlesey	9

art	Chess André Lang-Herfurth	38
	Self-Portrait with Snake Nalisha Rangel	37
	The Return Talal Al-Zied	40
	Chess Players André Lang-Herfurth	39
	Chakra Totem Seth Johnson	70
	Disappear Here Scott Kelly	88
details	Man Behind the Sun Seth Johnson	17
	Letter from the Editor Adam V. Wagner	7
	New Start Writing Workshop Jonel Thaller	60
	Facing an Autobiographical Paradox Mary Anderson	71
	Clearing Paths: An Interview with Laura Tohe Matthew Ray	42
	The Religion of Poetry: An Interview with Virgil Suárez Chloé Leisure	20
	Aesthetic Statements	80
	Contributors	74

*Thin Air* would especially like to thank Precious Bugarin and her Senior Design Studio Class for the development of our new concept. Their hard work is evident in the new look that we hope will be the hallmark of *Thin Air* for years to come.

Thanks are also due to Dr. Sibylle Gruber and the English Department for the acquisition of QuarkXPress which provides us with a platform to produce our issues.

Additionally, thanks go out to Barbara Anderson, Debbie Berktold, Karla Brewster, Ann Cummins, Susan Fitzmaurice, Bill Grabe, John Irsfeld, Suzie Larson, Sarah Lewis, Clara M. Lovett, Rob Maple, Kathleen McHugh, Thomas McPoil, Metagraphix, Jennifer Militello, Bryan Moore, New Start, Aaron Norris, Roger Piscano, Erika Rasmussen, Luis Rodriguez, Martha Shideler, Jim Simmerman, Virgil Suárez, Rick Swanson, Jane Armstrong Woodman, Allen Woodman, Organization of Graduate Students of English, and the Literacy Volunteers of Coconino County.

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special  
thanks

a c

a e s t h e t i c s

2001

In 1981, *The Reaper* published its “Non-negotiable Demands,” ten rules of aesthetics which concentrated on the narrative, formal and prosodic qualities of poetry while denouncing such concepts as “poems about poetry” and the mimicry of fashionable styles. It received modest attention. But what that small journal and its editors--Mark Jarman and Robert McDowell (the men behind the persona of “the Reaper”)--did achieve, was to contribute to the development of what would come to be known as “The New Narrative” movement and the reconsideration of Wallace Stevens’ poetry as model.

Looking at what’s hip in poetry in this, the start of the new millenium--from the New Formalist Movement to slams showcasing competitive styles--the fact that *The Reaper* may not have changed the world is beside the point. The point is, who can deny the passion for the literary arts that existed in Jarman and McDowell and that which they brought to their small magazine? At a time when no one seems to think to ask “what is fiction supposed to do?” or “what makes a good poem today?” (hell, at a time when people cringe if *anyone* asks these questions), who can denounce *The Reaper’s* goal?

Some of us at *Thin Air* feel that no one is asking what poetry, fiction and art are supposed to be doing today, and that the literary arts may suffer from this lack of conversation; that contemporary “artists” are headless chickens scrambling amongst an audience of farmhands that are not paying attention to the clucking because they do not care (we need only look to what sells in America, and art, quite frankly, has never been it). Others of us at *Thin Air* do not ask these questions and do not feel the need to (we argue about it still).

This issue, our eleventh to date, is an attempt to begin asking what we, as readers and writers, artists and viewers of art, look for and aspire to in the creation of art. In other words, how can we effectively and meaningfully participate in this aesthetic conversation. We have titled this issue “Aesthetics” in hope that in some small way, we can begin looking at art of all types as a conversation worth joining.



--Adam Wagner  
Editor

poetry contest winner

2001

## Mandoline Whittlesey

Mandoline Whittlesey is French-American and grew up living in several different countries. Among the places she calls home are France (by the Swiss border) and Southern Maine. Currently enrolled as a junior at Oberlin College, she is a creative writing major and dance minor. With one year left to go, she is wondering where she will end up next...

### judge for the contest

Jennifer Militello

Jennifer Militello teaches at Brown University. Her poems have been published in *Black Warrior Review*, *The Journal*, *The Paris Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and others. She has been awarded a Writers at Work Literary Fellowship and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her first manuscript, *From Moth to Sorrow*, was recently a finalist for the Verse Prize in Poetry

This annual cash award winning contest is open to all writers and poets. Winning pieces were selected based on style, content and originality.

Something about fingertips, something  
raw and slipping through, seaweed

in abandon bending, stunned  
by undulating flesh firm, by

flashes of scale like diamond limb  
and the almost but not quiteness of fall light.

My father bought  
my asthmatic daughter  
the biggest bear  
in Washington, DC.

He took it to a bar  
put it on a stool  
bought it a beer.

The smells of Camels  
and Budweiser filled  
its fuzz.

My dad  
always taking your  
breath away.

My friend Raymie found Jesus  
at the bottom of a moving box.  
The Baby Christ done in molded plastic,  
wrapped in Christmas paper towels  
like so many swaddling clothes. He'd been  
packed away from the manger,  
tucked inside the wrong garage box, and  
there he was,  
with Raymie's aquarium and some  
leftover fish food.

This is the sort of thing that can be taken as  
a sign.

Raymie put the baby Jesus  
in the bottom of the tank  
on a bed of those shiny pink aquarium rocks.  
His mother told him he'd be damned to hell,  
but the fish didn't bother Jesus much,  
and I think they all liked having him.  
Maybe  
even felt a little safer, because  
they didn't flinch when you tapped on the  
glass.  
Meanwhile, Raymie had Christ in his life,  
everyday, for the first time in years.  
He felt close to God as he drifted to sleep,  
watching the diamond tetras circle the  
Savior's head  
like angels.

I stood in the gray rain in front of the newspaper machines, uncertain. One of the two Seattle papers was a little bit better than the other, but I had forgotten which. I picked one at random, dropped my quarters in, pulled out the paper—"You know where you belong!" a deep, male voice said from six inches behind my head. I knew better than to turn around. I threw the paper in the trash and raced up the stairs to the maternity ward, arriving just in time to see the doctor roll the IV station, rattling and clanking, over to Deborah. She was pale, miserable, and nine and a half months pregnant. Her belly was impossibly large.

"It's time," she'd said eight hours earlier in the dimness before dawn. She leaned over and vomited on the floor. I quickly cleaned it up without commenting. She rolled slowly and heavily out of bed.

"Be sure to call Victor."

"Who's Victor?" I'd never known anyone called Victor.

"Who's Victor?" she repeated. We looked at each other blankly. "I don't know any Victor," she said, miffed, as though the conversation were my fault. I turned away. We got ready in silence to go to the hospital for the birth of Lilith Mariah Pete, our third child.

I already knew Lilith. I'd always had extended conversations with my babies when they were in the womb, but talking to Lilith was a river, a torrent of delight. She was as receptive as a soft, warm breath of wind, as endless as the ocean and as formless as fire. I

doubted she would live. I couldn't imagine how something that female would be able to survive penned up inside the strict hardness of matter. For Lilith, to be embodied in flesh would be like being buried alive. I expected a stillbirth. I hadn't told Deborah this.

"We have to chemically induce labor," the doctor was telling Deborah. After eight hours of labor the contractions had come farther and farther apart, then ceased altogether. "The fetal heart is showing signs of stress," she said, grimly. "It needs to come out now." The doctor had been worried ever since Deborah had checked into the hospital with a fever and dehydration. That meant she had an infection. Since she'd felt fine when she went to bed the night before, that meant an infection of suspicious origin.

"No drugs," Deborah said sourly.

The doctor looked at me. I knew the law according to Mother Nature: either the baby comes out or the mother and baby both die. I had a little talk with Deborah. She listened to my spiritual rationalizations with an irritated look on her face then said, "Okay. I'll take the drug in an hour if labor doesn't start up by itself."

"Now," I demanded.

"Half an hour," she countered.

"Ten minutes," I offered.

"Fifteen."

"Okay. Fifteen."

Tense time itched by. On the mark the doctor

pulled the clanking IV over—labor started up all by itself with good hard contractions. “Works every time,” the doctor murmured.

A few hours later the head began to crown. An essence of female, so formless it could not exist on this level of reality, was within seconds of emerging into form. Something would have to break. I bent over Deborah’s great belly, put my left hand behind her back and my right hand under her knee, lifting up her leg. I squeezed her upper body toward her belly and pulled her knee toward me in time with her beet-red-face grunting, then made a death-wish commitment that turned my life into a bridge for Lilith—the head slipped out and a blast of foul odor ruptured the air, filling the room with pestilence. The baby’s head was covered with pus. I breathed through my mouth so I wouldn’t vomit. The doctor wiped the head quickly then worked hard on getting the rest of the baby out, vigorously wiggling and pulling and twisting the tiny body. The baby’s shoulders slipped out—an electric shock jolted the palms of my hands, raced up each arm to join inside my heart with a massive flash of electricity, as the baby slithered out with a plop! into the doctor’s hands and began to scream in heartfelt horror.

She hung it upside down by the heels. Lurid purple and grotesquely enlarged from the hormones of late pregnancy, the baby’s penis and balls dangled down over his upside-down fat little tummy like trophies. Lilith Mariah Pete was a boy. The room started to slide out from under my wobbly legs and dizzy eyes—I stood

tall and breathed with extreme care. “I will deal with this later,” I told myself sternly, over and over and over again. I didn’t faint. I functioned like a robot, but I didn’t faint.

The neonatal team moved in like astronauts on a mission. Fluids were tested faster than I could tell they were being extracted. The baby surpassed all measurements for health, and minutes after birth Deborah’s temperature dropped to normal. The entire infection was in the placenta, which was completely covered in odious, noisome pus. They disposed of it like nuclear waste. The doctor said the infection had bloomed shortly before labor began. Since there had been no penetration of the hermetically sealed container of the womb, there was no explanation for the infection. Not only that, in only ten hours Deborah had absorbed a phenomenal ten liters of fluid. And finally, the infection that was potentially fatal to mother and fetus had vanished at birth. “There’s no explanation for that either,” the doctor added, staring at us.

I had one, although it wasn’t medical.  
Something too female to be born had found a way.

We had no other name. We called him Victor.

All we are really interested in is each other's bodies.  
(Mine still humming like a nuclear reactor.)

So when I did a poetry reading in Maine  
and my poor dear host did not know what to  
do with me I thought "Howsabout we spend the morning  
*getting to know each other's bodies?*"

Family bodies highly interesting too of course but weirder.  
Parents having or not having sex and they let you in on it,  
that's sick.

Parent's having sex with others and they let you in on it,  
that's sicker.  
Sick parents dying which is good because it clears the air,

speaking of which you wonder about Dad's  
lung cancer: the big fib him a heavy smoker  
but his tumor "*not*" the kind from cigarettes.  
So it wasn't his fault all that trouble he put us to.

Him signing up with the Tumor Registry (for godsake):  
"Maybe this info will help someone else."  
(Why the hell didn't you quit smoking?)

All we are really interested in is each other's bodies  
—four sisters together because Dad is dying.  
Exciting, unready, magnetic: swimming at Dennis Pond us  
in our bathing suits! Incest is best!! — politically  
incorrect of course. We know it's terribly damaging and  
worst of all it shuts people up, secrets

*can and will kill.*

Naked, naked sisters and all that goes with.

But guidance is everywhere?

The gorgeous blond twins who posed constantly for *Playboy*  
swore they swore off it because one of them  
"got tired of seeing my sister naked."

Least she'd had her fill.



Seth Johnson

Ink on paper  
11.5 x 9 inch

How the whole eat-for-Daddy-this-one-time-please tricks got started, I couldn't remember. I found myself coming home from work to cook whatever the girls would eat. The girls, Gabby, five, and Alex, eight, lived with us in the house. They had come to stay with us from the very beginning. Alex had a good appetite, but Gabby needed the tricks, the role playing, the noise, the hoopla, the song and dance—Daddy clowning around in the kitchen. Daddy twisting his ankle as he stepped on a wedge of refrigerator ice-maker ice, and they laughed, and laughed. Daddy didn't think it much fun. *What was the big deal?* I kept asking my wife.

*She likes it when you act silly, my wife said. She eats better that way.*

Gabby sat with the spoon in one hand and her "tete" or pacifier in the other. She had a whole stash of *tetes*. When she wasn't sucking on them, she was eating, or clawing around on her hands and knees. No book was safe. She tore through my books like a tornado, eating paper. Once in a while she'd smile and show me a mouthful of words, white like chicken feathers.

She thrived on paper. After she ate through the books, she started in on the magazines and newspapers. She digested the newspaper much better than the glossy pages of *Cosmopolitan*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*. She loved, loved the 3 x 5 subscription inserts that fell out of the magazines like snow.

When she grew up, she spat up slogans at us. We couldn't win any arguments. She knew everything. At night, she came to our room and told us stories, whole sentences spilling out of her mouth like shredded paper, long serpentine ribbons in rainbow colors.

Right before we fell asleep, she tucked us in, kissed us good night, sent us into another dreamy land of gauzy paper, stories made up of red and green words that flew about us, batted their wings against our ears, sent us off into interminable flights of fancy.

Virgil Suárez was born in Havana, Cuba in 1962 and moved to the United States in 1974 with his family. In 1987, Suárez received his MFA in Creative Writing from Louisiana State University. Currently, he is an associate professor at Florida State University in Tallahassee, teaching classes in fiction, poetry, and Latino/a (especially Cuban-American) literature. Suárez's work has been published in countless journals and reviews and he has been nominated for five Pushcart Prizes. He also won the New York Public Library's Best Book for the Teenage and is a NEA Recipient for the year 2001-2002. Suárez is the author of over fifteen books of fiction, prose, and poetry, including *Palm Crows* (poems, 2001), *In the Republic of Longing* (poems, 2000), and *Spared Angola: Memories from a Cuban American Childhood* (poems, essays, short fiction, 1997). His prose and poetry are rich both in texture and emotion, a result of his careful weaving of memory and imagination throughout his sensuous words and images.



This interview with Suárez was conceived through many emails. Although conducted "on-line," the interview was just as intimate and honest as though done in person. While I was compiling the pieces of the interview, I found Suárez's thoughts and ideas to be consistently energetic, genuine, kind, and above all, inspirational.

**Leisure:** When did you begin writing for pleasure? When did you know that writing was your "calling?"

**Suárez:** Writing didn't develop into a "pleasure" for many years after I had started to write. I always wrote with a deep sense of purpose. I always wrote because I wanted to write about my life as an uprooted Cuban boy, about the people I cared about and loved. It was precisely a sort of calling, a yearning for getting the record down on paper. I still write with the same degree of purpose and spirit in mind. Over the last few years, writing has become quite pleasurable in part because I find myself writing within a larger communi-

ty of writers and readers. It's a comforting feeling. I will often get emails from people, complete strangers, telling me how they read one of my stories, essays or poems and how I made them think about their own lives. I started out as a poet and I am still writing poetry, though I write prose. I tend to divide my day into two halves. In the morning I write poetry and then in the afternoon I revise and work on prose, which I revise only on the weekends.

**Leisure:** When writing poetry, do poems find you? Or do you find them?

**Suárez:** I crave and read contemporary poetry. I collect it. I believe poetry is my religion. I believe in the poem. I believe in poetry. From reading so much of it, comes understanding, from understanding comes inspiration. I've never been one of these writers who has to wait for inspiration to strike. I write everyday, no matter what. I find the poems, not the other way around. I work the poems into being. Craft them. I revise my heart out once I think I'm on to something good. I discard almost half of everything I write. The process, thanks to the computer, has become a little faster. I no longer have to use those white-out strips or liquid paper. I also like the pulse of the cursor. Sometimes I think it is the beating of my own heart.

**Leisure:** You say that, "poetry is your religion." Do you believe that because of what poetry is able to give to your soul?

**Suárez:** It is LIKE a religion for me. It IS my religion. It's what I believe in, have the most faith in. It's what I count on on a daily basis. I keep thinking of a recent song by Bob Dylan that goes something like "your mind is your temple / keep it beautiful and clean." Yeah, poetry keeps me whole. It allows me to reinvent myself everyday, my reality. It allows me to

live in the world without succumbing to my usual depressions. If I don't write, I fall prey to it. I'm not much fun, or of any use, when I am not writing. I get rather gloomy. I also collect poetry and keep it all in my study. My study is a chapel—it has an air of holiness that I find rather inviting. Dead poets, alive poets, ancient poets—they are all here in this room keeping me company.

**Leisure:** What book(s) are you currently reading?

**Suárez:** Lord, I am reading everything. I am reading Bob Hicok, Denise Duhamel's wonderful new and selected collection *Queen for a Day*. I am rereading Neruda, Lorca, Guillén, Loynaz. Heberto Padilla died this year, so I have been reading much of his work. I am doing research on my new book titled *E(x)it Jesús*, so I am reading the bible from cover to cover. I am reading all I can about some of the lesser-known Saints.

**Leisure:** In this issue of *Thin Air*, we're focusing on the subject of 'aesthetics.' In your writing, what do you believe to be your own aesthetic purpose or goal?

**Suárez:** My own intent is to write and craft the best piece of writing I possibly can write. I like to think I am a consummate and meticulous (sometimes to the point of obsession) editor. Without revision, I have nothing. My most pressing goal is to capture the essence and dignity of the material I write about. In my case it is the plight and struggle of being an exile, of being Cuban, Cuban-American, of having grown up in an island, distant and tropical—an island that grows bigger in my imagination. As much as I like to think about aesthetics, I am always reminded of what I tell my students, too: leave what you mean up to the literary critics and scholars, focus on the words, focus on the writing itself. The act of writing will save your life. It's saved mine. Believe in poetry!

**Leisure:** Who are some of your favorite authors, and why?

**Suárez:** I don't have any favorites, really. I simply read everything I can get my hands on. I admire a lot of writers and poets. I like the work of Nick Carbo, Adrian C. Louis, Sherman Alexie, Kim Addonizio, and so many others.

**Leisure:** From where do you gather most of your inspiration?

**Suárez:** Inspiration comes to the poet (or writer) through both life experience and from reading other poets. Inspiration comes through meditation shortly after having read or witnessing something powerful, something breath-taking, mind-blowing.

**Leisure:** You teach Creative Writing at Florida State University. As a professor, when do you find yourself feeling most rewarded?

**Suárez:** When I begin to see form and content begin to click into the right places in a student's work.

When the student begins to recognize that the workshop experience is a life-long activity. Most students are mistaken in thinking that after "graduating" from a workshop, that's it, no more. It isn't true. The learning process continues. You enter a larger community of people: other writers, readers, editors, folks who are always going to give you hints, help.

**Leisure:** What do you enjoy creating more: fiction or poetry? Why? What different pleasures and frustrations do each genre bring to you?

**Suárez:** I like writing, and sometimes I sit down to write either poetry or prose, often not knowing how an idea is going to choose its own genre, or form. I enjoy them both equally. I find poetry requires more out of me. I have a ranting spirit by nature, so I can write on and on. Poetry forces me to focus on wringing the details out of a line. Neither one is easy, nor

difficult. Writing is writing, or as Ishmael Reed says: "Writin' is fightin'."

**Leisure:** In much of your poetry, I've noticed that you make many very sensuous and fantastic references to various plants, animals, fruits, and vegetables. Do you feel this is a subconscious effort on your part, or do you recognize the fact that you are frequently drawn to and inspired by the earth and nature?

**Suárez:** I come from a tropical island in the Caribbean. I grew up around exotic animals, plants. I grew up hearing the adults call out the names of fruit, for example, like *guanabana*, *mamoncillo*, *caimito*, and *mamey*. Any of these words can send you into a dizzy spell in terms of sounds. I had early training in hearing about so many wonderful things that though I might not have registered them in my life back then, I filed them in memory. Every once in a while something will surface in my mind, and I will be overwhelmed by the image, the sound of something. I find myself living in the woods of Tallahassee, and when I spend the summers in Key Biscayne, nature is also all around me. In Key Biscayne you get the feral iguanas, the feral parrots, the blue crabs that come to land to breed every year. Imagine you wake up and the whole place is covered with blue crabs. Tallahassee has deer, raccoons, foxes, armadillos—oh, those armadillos—you name it. It's all around me so I have to take notice. They make me notice.

**Leisure:** Being born and raised in Havana, Cuba, in what ways do you think your childhood has made an impact on your writing?

**Suárez:** This question is interestingly related to the previous one. The tropics are amazingly rich in fauna and flora. Also, the history and politics of the place had an impact on me. Obviously the politics drove my parents out, and my parents have lived in exile

now for almost forty years. I left Cuba when I was eight. I've never been back. Not physically anyway. Mentally I return every morning. The place, the people, the water—it is always all there in the back of my mind, waiting to jump out. I remember walking through the grassy vacant lot at the corner as the sun went down and shaking the fireflies out of the tall grass so that I could put them in jars. I brought the jars inside and put them next to my bed. I went to sleep looking at these insects flashing their code. When I close my eyes I think of that "green." Like the green that hypnotizes Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*. Whatever that green means, it is something powerful. I hope it is the green that I will one day close my eyes to with finality, in peace and rest.

**"Yeah, poetry keeps me whole. It allows me to reinvent myself everyday, my reality. It allows me to live in the world without succumbing to my usual depressions. If I don't write, I fall prey to it. I'm not much fun, or of any use, when I am not writing. I get rather gloomy. I also collect poetry and keep it all in my study. My study is a chapel—it has an air of holiness that I find rather inviting. Dead poets, alive poets, ancient poets—they are all here in this room keeping me company."**

What is striking, at first, is the image of the spirit, la mujer angel descending into the Sonoran desert, black, below the waist hair, a mane spreading out in the wind, wraith like above the left hand, fingers spread wide as a distended claw, a blackened silhouette against bramble thickets, encrusted stone, in a stark contrast to the full, white cotton sheath of her dress billowing, dragging in dust and low flowering cactus. She is a figure, portentous, captured in black and white, the breadth of the desert below her, distant hills shimmering, tumorous lumps on the landscape, eternal as an other world image from Bergman or a Fellini Juliet of the Spirits betrayed in this one by the strange recorded voice of El Brujo, The Wicked One, speaking the language of another place; the message she is carrying down with her from the cliffs is a coded one that tells us secrets that could only be learned in a land of the dead.

The body the crippled dwarf had been dealt mystifies. In its bobbing and weaving, how it stays atop the earth being so close to it, plummeting at every step towards it but then triumphantly regaining its balance. How it makes its way to the city to put the concrete firmly between itself and the tug of the earth. We imagine the hardened cement will postpone our burial, that there will be the luxury of a few extra movements that don't take place in an open grave, where we are so negligently tossed in the country. One day out walking suddenly the earth gapes, our jaws drop, and we are mesmerized like a solid black page in Sterne that swallows us all at once.

In the city however when the safety of all eyes is on us, it seems we couldn't be drawn in by the next step. For our pride won't let us; it's like the improbability of drowning in full view of a beachful of bathers. Our body may give out, our heart besiege us, our mind go haywire, but somehow the urban fumes, the roaring of the Guadalajara buses, the noxious stream of traffic insure that we will be borne along for more time than a country walk and falling head first into a ditch will allow. No matter the whining of the dog. In we go head first and the ground closes and we enrich it with a decomposition that may take only days if the birds of prey, the flies and buzzards, the maggots don't get to us first. And the short legs and arms of a dwarf insure that there will be less to consume. That the putrefaction will reach bone quicker and have to contend with its temporary hardness, despite the exaggerated

calcification. The head will be a hollow skull in no time. And all the moves in the brain tissue will be devoured, an infinity of them; the brilliant ones yet to be made, and those already committed to memory. And not the clanking of the metal crutches. Not those awkward moves of the body, but the perfectly executed moves inside the mind that routinely defeat opponents with healthy bodies, tanned athletic bodies that need this curious validation, that take to the chessboard as if it is the last arena. And there at the Posada Regis, described in the travel book as a peaceful oasis in the center of noisy, polluted, bustling downtown Guadalajara, there battles are fought nightly with the resilient dwarf.

Like all dwarfs he had a solid, a remarkable head, a cranial overcapacity that gives the impression of resting atop a cardboard body in a photographer's studio, a crippled body it has outgrown by leaps and bounds. In the eyes immediately you can see more moves than the dwarf could make in a lifetime. He waits for travelers who day after day appear only to be knocked down like kingpins—towering, big-boned men from Europe and North America, with blond hair and blue eyes and bodies that women swoon over, some even with their women in tow (who will sit with them on park benches with arms entwined reading out of the same book), they come to the peaceful Posada Regis to get summarily crushed just inside the spacious architecture of Spanish politeness. They leave with less swagger, with a visible slump in their shoulders, with almost a limp themselves, bowed in spirit despite their

strong bodies. As if in an uncanny way they are mimicking the dwarf, as if that gives them access to his condition, to a strategic coordination that their healthy bodies don't have. More than one traveler has visibly limped out of the posada affected by the loss to the dwarf. And almost all have that slight hunch to their shoulders, as if they are still trying to get closer to the absent board for one last move. They lose the square in their shoulders, being no match for the sixty four. Their bodies are sacrificed to the mental gymnastics of the dwarf, healthy bodies that get in the way like oversized baggage as they stumble trying to keep up with him sitting across from them.

He crushes opponents like the stews they have in their five course afternoon specials. Ragouts he makes of them, fricassees, mole sauces that add to the delectation of his triumphant ego. But so disciplined an ego does he have that it expresses itself no more than in politely asking for another game. He is cordial and dignified, a scion of the old Spanish aristocracy in Mexico that still seeks to preserve the amenities of Castilian Spain and promote the best of its arts, the best of its wisdom, its philosophy that Schopenhauer so admired in her proverbs. Sitting before the dwarf you felt that you were in the presence of a higher culture that could take the bullfight in stride, with the aplomb of a broad view towards the violence inherent in man that could benefit by the compression of sunlight, in an afternoon when thousands review the drama of life in miniature, read it on the faces of the matadors, in the anguish of the bull, in the striking meeting where the man

is tossed by the horn or the fiery sunlight is buried in the shadow of the bull's blood, not unlike the *sol y sombra* seating that ceases to divide the audience as the afternoon wears on. Most would argue that the chessboard is slight by comparison to the lustiness of the bellows, the agony of the man, but still every gesture, the dropping of the pieces into the box with slightly stronger force, the swallowing of a glass of water with a fraction of a decibel of greater confidence, aches too like the lowing of the bull, like the audience disappointed throwing their cushions into the ring—like the audible sighs of an intolerable position, or a succession of checks that goes in for the coup de grace, the final embracing of the opponent. The move just before raising the sword before the opponent's neck—a crippled dwarf on tiptoe about to plant the *banderilla*—with the queen already in his hand—amorous dwarf, disguised lady killer, about to mate, having won over taller, healthy specimens, having triumphed over natural selection. Now he is the main matador at center stage, not at the Plaza de Toros, but sitting in the half-light of Posada Regis, a former mansion, making a move that will cut down another European, or overconfident American, deft move like the pirouette and swift darting of the matador's hips; here the clamor isn't heard except in an orchestration of tapping fingers or clearing of the throat, and the twist of a piece off the board and into a pine box that bumps and rattles the poorer players off to potter's field even before the game has started. One after another the dwarf employs the skillful strokes of a painter, a great Mexican muralist, the nemesis of the

forces of capitalism, of minds always bent on enslavement.

It was into this oasis that I walked, tired, thirsty, needing a good meal. I brought my woman with me to watch—as a constant reminder that I was a marauder and could like a soldier in Poussin's "Rape of the Sabine Women" hoist whomever I wanted—after crossing the border—over my back and leave town. Of course this was a posture, but I took pleasure in my manhood, my powers of triumph. I could pretty much achieve what I wanted, and scoffed at limits. I took a certain amount of interest in the underdog, but was only able to marginally identify myself with him. Though the short are almost too literally the lowly, still they inspire fascination. Aristotle maintains the short can never be beautiful. But he was talking physically, not about the enlarged mind.

After I recovered my strength I was drawn to a chess game between the dwarf and another Mexican. The dwarf maneuvered the pieces on the board with a deftness I had not observed before. He was like a large bird that hovered over the board and left the pieces in his own shadow. He seemed to be perched on the branch of a dead tree surveying the dry land for those fleet-footed animals that circle endlessly without drawing the straight line of a castle, the diagonal of a bishop, without the abstract moves of the almost mythical horse that can leap castle and royalty. He hovered and the hunched shoulders alone intimidated before he brought his unusually long arms into play, like talons picking up what might appear a struggling pawn to place it in a position of strength all out of proportion to its

size and importance. Like a field mouse at the den of a snake. Out of nowhere, out of a crumpled up body, like paper that writers toss into the corner suddenly unwrinkling itself and rendering legible not the failed efforts but a whole new script that strikes through inherent dullness to produce something brilliant, the cripple consolidating his position with a sacrificial pawn. Suddenly there was apparent one of those easy triumphs that have been planned from the beginning to look like defeat when they reverse themselves to the surprise of everyone but the person who hatched them. There on the board such transformations took place three nights running. On the second night the dwarf dispatched an Austrian who owned a restaurant in the Alps and who played there regularly, dispatched him in four games. After the third night the dwarf took on almost mythic proportions. The next day he looked at me with the eyes of an assessor, a centurion, just because of the physical contrast with the stunted body. Like a Roman with a brush helmet, someone fresh from the Hellenic wars who knows the undermining Presocratics, someone who soundly defeated the proponents of Aristotle, or Plato, to establish a new Roman Empire, someone who had within him the seeds of a conquering Cortez who with only four hundred soldiers overcame the entire Aztec empire. Someone up on his high horse, a knight almost beautiful bodied for all the mating he had done with a mind that could transform physical matter at will. The egos I had seen crushed and strewn around the Posada Regis those few days were ample testament to his generalship. And so as he

surveyed me that night he asked for a game.

My heart thumped as I accepted with the usual disclaimers. I am more an observer, really not especially good, haven't played in years. He nodded with an understanding I imagined could take the whole board in blindfolded, even the rationalizations as no more than psychological preliminaries to pitched battle. Suddenly the dwarf's body sitting across from me seemed larger than mine, despite my already short torso. Though my moves took at times interminably long, still the game progressed and I saw a suggestion of vulnerability and thought in the back of my mind maybe he could be beaten when he unexpectedly moved his rook. Like a dark bird it came out of the shadows of humiliation and deformity, out of all the bitterness of a lifetime of limping around strong, healthy bodies and immediately his body which had assumed a kind of lightness when I thought I was in the game grew rock hard, dense, and immobile. The tiny plant clutching to my mind withered and died. Like a boulder he sat on an eminence, on my chest, and occasionally the wing of a cape would brush across my cheek the material that drops from a long trumpeter's horn to announce the arrival of the victorious king. The next moment I was in checkmate and all the metal of his brace didn't even have to clank to produce a supporting army, for he alone traveled on his stomach and at the same time rose and hovered, a kind of density in air, old man, philosopher king, more than Plato bargained for, the royalty of Posado Regis ready to disabuse all who presumed to be visiting Magi. It is only a game of

chess, it may well be argued. But not for a crippled dwarf, for an intellect who feels acutely the deep insult of physical difference, or the incompatibility of mind. The contained conflagration of Mexican sunlight swooping into the Posada Regis to eliminate the guise of the shade was almost more than anyone could bear, as it continued to bake cracks in the putty of the surrounding windows.

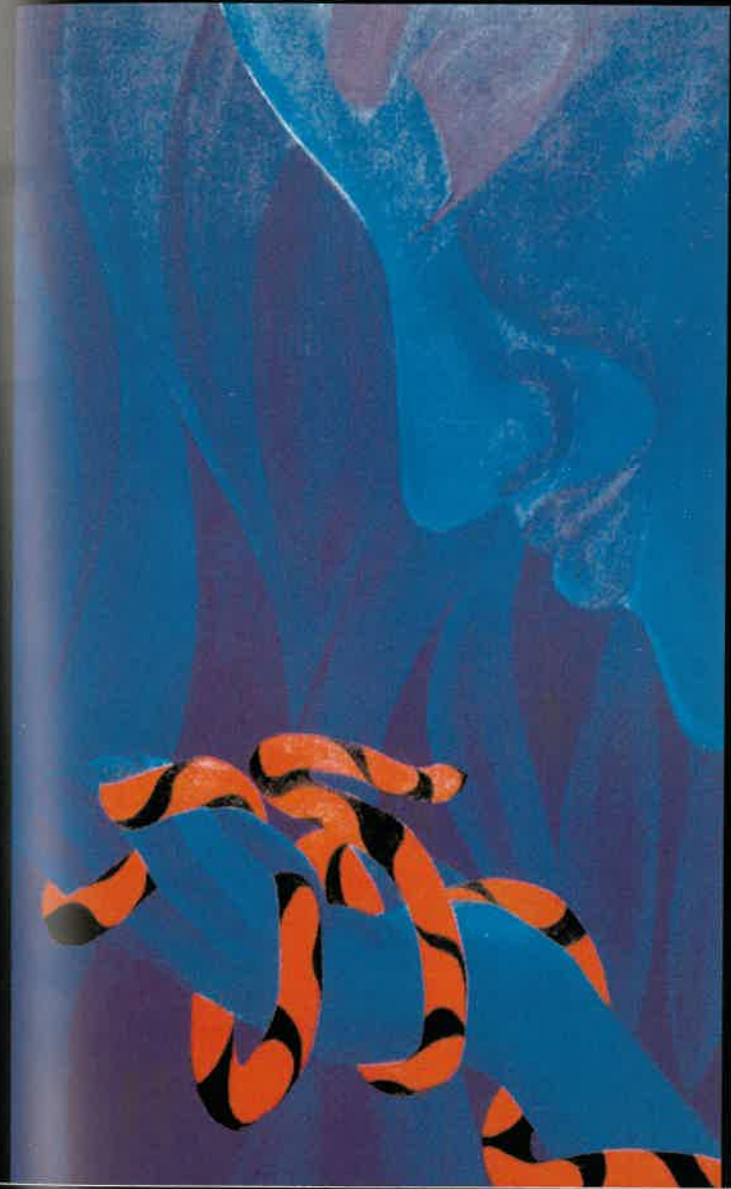
All he did was ask one of his lackeys for a Coke and asked if I wanted a soft drink. Will you give me another game? I asked crushed. My woman fled uneasy at all that was at stake, but came back at the beginning of the second game. Would I have to forfeit her to the winner? The droll thought tormented me as the second game started with exaggerated caution. But despite myself an ease of strategy emerged that made my heart pound in my ears till I wasn't sure that I was not going to faint. Under both my arms even though it was a cool night two giant wet stains appeared as we cleared the board until he made the faux pas that exposed his queen. My knight quickly took her and from that moment his crippled legs grew more malformed, a hump almost appeared on his back, and the enormous physical differences between us returned. I could feel a crack rive the density of his resolve. Before my eyes he seemed to unpetrify, there was a geological change and I felt a tiny violet was working its way into the certainty of a large gray boulder, making dust as it moved. Finally I was able to finish him off. My woman had gone to our room. I tried to stifle a sigh of suppressed triumph. Will you give me another game? he asked. No, it's almost mid-

night, I said, it's a little late. Maybe tomorrow, he said. Yes, I replied, but without conviction.

I returned to my room. Well, did you win? she asked. Yes, I said, almost beside myself bursting with pride, ready to dance as if my cramped body, bent, hunched over the chessboard all that time was returning. I threw myself on the bed and threw my arms into the air then tried to embrace her and every woman as my mate, but she sensing the promiscuity turned away, as if to say no, not me too. She knew that by winning I had reduced him to the proportions he actually was, not allowing the psychological triumph that gave him a body far beyond the one he dragged around the Posada Regis, when he wasn't perched immobile at the front desk.

The next afternoon when he came on duty he asked me for a game, but I said, no, we were leaving in an hour. For I had decided that it was better to head for the coast than let him regain the size he had lost. I hurried out of the Posada Regis so he would remain cheated by nature.

If you've seen any make-out scene featured in the back of a taxicab, I have to say it was nothing like that. We were not graceful and the driver didn't glance back and laugh at the beauty of us. Instead, he coughed a couple of times and when we didn't look up, he kicked us out a couple of blocks early, two figures left on the corner, messed, mussed, interrupted, me laughing and cursing at the absurdity of it all while my companion buttoned his shirt. But while we were there in the cab for that moment, careless for our surroundings, handing over ourselves bravely even when it would be the last time I would see him before he changed his mind about me, it didn't matter that the plastic seats were greasy, that age had stained the plexiglass I leaned on, that, like a parted mouth, my purse was spilling all over the place.



Self Portrait with Snake

Nalisha Rangel

Acrylic on Canvas  
16 x 20 inch



Chess

André Lang-Herfurth

Oil on Canvas  
49 x 29 inch



Chess Players

André Lang-Herfurth

Oil on Canvas  
29 x 29 inch



Talal Al-Zied

Spray-paint on brick  
7 x 6.5 feet

The Return

If the market don't get you then the workload will  
as you take three jobs for a thousand dollar bill  
with a broom up your ass and your gut on fire  
and your creditors nagging at the end of the wire  
and your wife's run off and your margin is due  
and your daughter's on crack, and there's no one to sue  
for your fucked-up life and your dreams of riches,  
of wheels and boats and sun and stitches  
and gourmet pasta and pears out of season  
and sinful chocolate to subvert your reason;  
then it's half past quotes and the next gig's far  
and you race to your ultimate mag wheel car,  
and you tool on out like commercials claim  
cause you need no family, joy or brain –  
there's the road to love and the power to take it,  
your Beamer, your threads, to prove you could make it,  
but you drive to the edge where a change is blowing  
and you pass all the malls and you keep on going  
past the smell of the oil and the stink of the glut  
and you find yourself thinking you could live in a hut  
at the end of nowhere minus all this gear  
and shake off the nightmare they've dreamed up here.

There are still a few paths to clear. I still have to find a place for myself, and I'm hopefully clearing a path for those who come after me.

-Laura Tohe, 1998



Born to the *Tsénahablinít* (Sleepy Water People clan) and for the *Tódichíí'níi* (Bitter Water clan), Laura Tohe (*Diné*) has recently emerged as a rather new and exciting voice in contemporary literature. Born on the Navajo Nation in Fort Defiance, AZ, Tohe lived much of her early life in a traditional log and mud *hogan* with no modern conveniences. Kathy Khoury in *The Arizona Republic* reports, "After her parents divorced, she and her mother, five brothers and sister moved into her grandmother's small house in Crystal, NM, an isolated hamlet with a trading post, a Mormon church and a small log and stone school-house" (Khoury, 1998, p. 1). As a result of growing up near the Chuska Mountains in north-eastern Arizona and New Mexico, Tohe spent much of her early life attending both public and boarding schools in Albuquerque, NM. A prolific writer, Tohe's poetry and stories have appeared in various journals, anthologies, and even been translated into modern dance and music numbers in Omaha, NE. Currently an Associate Professor in the English Department at Arizona State University teaching Native American Literature and Native American Women's Literature, among other classes, Tohe holds a B.A. in Psychology from the University of New Mexico, an M.A. and Ph.D in English from the University of Nebraska, and, is the first *Diné* to be awarded a Ph.D in English (Khoury 1998, p. 1).

Tohe's first major publication, *No Parole Today*, reflects much of these childhood experiences, and, these experiences effect on Tohe later in life. Although Tohe was awarded the **Writer of the Year** for *No Parole Today* by the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers, very little critical attention has been paid to both Tohe's literary works and Tohe as a person. It is the attempt of this interview to tackle these issues and present Tohe in a manner that best depicts both her literary ideals and her personal characteristics.

Ray: Could you talk about when you first started writing?  
Tohe: I started writing in secret when I was about twelve years old, but I never really did anything with it. I wanted to be a writer when I was about at that age, but I never really wrote anything until I was in college at the University of New Mexico, in the seventies. There was an instructor there by the name of Geary Hobson, and I would tell him that I did this sort of thing and he asked if he could look at my writing sometime. He said that he would share his writing with me which was really important because he was the instructor and I was the student. We shared each other's work, and to be honest, I don't even remember what I really wrote about. But, what was important was the affirmation of my writing.

Ray: I've also read that Rudolfo Anaya was one of your instructors at UNM. Is that accurate?

Tohe: Yes. However, that wasn't until after I graduated from UNM and I went back to school. He was one of the teachers and I wanted to take his class.

Ray: Was this "writing in secret" that you refer to a result of your boarding school experience?

Tohe: No. I always liked to read and my mother used to take me to the library where we would check out all kinds of books. I would also read comic books and things like that. Living on the reservation, my life was very isolated. We didn't have a television, all we had was a radio; so my brothers and I did a lot of reading growing up and that was one form of entertainment.

Ray: So you came from a big family?

Tohe: Yes. I grew up with a lot of brothers, five. To me, then, reading was something that entertained me and I wanted to be a writer.

Ray: Let's talk about your most recent major publication, *No Parole Today*. After reading this book, I am curious as to who you intend the audience of this book to be. In other words, who do you hope to reach or affect in your writing?

Tohe: Well, both Indian and non-Indian people because I want to reach a very wide audience. Some of the poems in *No Parole Today* are specifically experiences of a Navajo person. But, when I read my work in front of a Navajo audience, their response to it is much different than when I read to a non-Indian audience. They see the humor in it which a non-Indian audience usually doesn't see. They [non-Indians] just see the victimization or the oppression; but it's really not meant for that. That's part of the full

experience, but so is the humor. It's really interesting when I read my work because Navajo people will be laughing and having a good time and everybody else is sitting there taking it very seriously. So, my audience is both. I write because I want to give a Navajo voice or give expression to the Navajo. Also, I want to affect a non-Indian audience as well. Obviously because you know, they are also buying the book. They have a lot more access to books than Indian people who live on the reservation.

**Ray:** So, do you hope to have a different effect on non-Indian people then the effect you hope to have on Indian people?

**Tohe:** No, I really don't. I really don't think about that when I write. I just sort of write and then just let it go and see how other people experience it. But, I've written things that really touch women. For example, relationships with males. I've had women, all women, not just Indian women, or specifically Navajo women, that have really responded to a story, telling me that "I really liked that story" or "It really meant something to me."

**Ray:** That's interesting. One thing I wanted you to talk about is the Navajo storytelling tradition and its importance to you as a writer.

**Tohe:** Well, when I was growing up I was always surrounded by storytellers and my family. It was just always around me. When I was taking this class, Anaya's class, he helped me realize that there were stories all around us. All I had to do was to just listen to those stories, and invite them if I wanted to, and I did. That's how I wrote my first story. It was a story that my mother told me when I was about ten. It was about how through the neglect of parents, they lost their children, their human children, and they became prairie dogs. So, it's a creation-type story that she told me. When I took Anaya's class, I wrote that story with a contemporary setting to it. So that part of me, the Navajo storytelling or oral tradition, really informs my work because most of the work I have been writing are prose poems or essays; but most of my work is informed by the oral tradition.

**Ray:** What are some of the contemporary oral stories that are currently being told by Navajo people? Are there new stories that are emerging?

**Tohe:** Yes. There are always new stories emerging. The stories that we know from time immemorial, such as creation emergence stories, these kinds of stories still have much meaning with Navajo people. For example, the

recent referendum to allow gaming on the Navajo reservation was turned down because we have a story that tells us what would happen if we allowed gambling to come back. There is still great belief in these stories for us. Even though that story happened in time immemorial it still holds relevance to us. It's not forgotten or laid to rest. We don't say, "Let's go on and do these contemporary things that other tribes do." These stories that happened a long time ago tell us that it can happen again today because we are all a part of these stories.

**Ray:** Switching gears here a little bit, I was curious if you currently write in the Navajo language?

**Tohe:** I used to, when I first started writing because the Navajo language is very descriptive, especially with the use of verbs. When I first started writing I used to first think of it in Navajo and then translate it into English. But, I don't do that much anymore.

**Ray:** Why not? How much of a difference is there when you write something in Navajo and then transcribe it into English? Does it have quite a different effect?

**Tohe:** I think it does. If I think of it in Navajo and then try to write it in English, the translation gets in the way. I don't think it can be done very well, at least I don't do it well. When I've tried it, I try to translate the images that are attached to the verbs. The Navajo language is imagistic and strongly verb-based. An object such as a ball and tire are described as objects that have the property of roundness and therefore have the potential to roll. Seeing through the mind of the Navajo language reveals how the natural world possesses life, spirit and potential.

**Ray:** I'm glad that you mentioned the use of humor earlier. I've always thought that humor is one of the main features that seems to be present in contemporary Native American literature central to the real meaning of the story itself. Do you see a difference in the use of humor in older traditional stories compared to the contemporary ones or do you see them as essentially serving the same function?

**Tohe:** I think it serves the same function. Our humor is like our shield in that it protects us from too much sadness or sorrow. It's a way that we can shield ourselves from

that. It's also something that is meant to be shared.

**Ray:** Right. Would you say that you attempt to show differences or shed light on the differences between old traditional values and beliefs and contemporary Navajo life? Or, do you see yourself blending these two? For example, one of the things that I've noticed about your writing is various references to contemporary issues. So, are you doing this to show the difference between today's Navajo values and beliefs compared to old values and beliefs, or are they essentially the same thing? Has there been a change over time?

**Tohe:** I think I attempt to do both. I was born and raised on the reservation by Navajo parents who taught me the Navajo language. Now I live in a large city and teach for one of the largest universities in the country. I can move between these two worlds, though sometimes I get tired of living in the city. Sometimes Navajo philosophy comes into conflict with western culture. I'm a contemporary Navajo woman whose foundation is still connected to the homeland and my family there. My writing reflects this theme. Majoring in English was unusual for someone from my generation who attended boarding schools where we were forced to speak English and punished for speaking our native language. The implied question asked why I was "learning the language of the enemy" especially when doctors, lawyers, and engineers were needed in Indian communities. I always liked reading and I wanted to be a writer when I was a young child, and I wasn't interested in those other fields. To write is powerful and can be dangerous.

**Ray:** Many critics of Native American literature such as Joseph Bruchac have stated that one thing that is traditionally present in Native American literature is this idea of "survival." Do you see that in your writing?

**Tohe:** Yes, definitely in *No Parole Today*. That is the theme in my book. Survival rather than victimization. I don't want to be a victim. I don't think of myself as one and I don't want my audience to think of me as someone embittered

by the Indian School experience. I have survived that, as Indian people have survived atrocities such as the Indian holocaust, land, language, and family losses. We are still there.

**Ray:** How do the differences between genders or sexes figure into your writing? Do you deal with them in different ways?

**Tohe:** I usually deal with male/female relationships in terms of landscape. We don't have a valentine kind of tradition, sending flowers, candy, cards, etc. "Let me compare thee to a spring day..." We don't have terms of endearment such as "honey," and "sweetheart," for loved ones outside of our children and family. A long time ago marriages were arranged for practical reasons. Some still are. Dating and courting didn't precede marriage as they do now. Instead of flowers a man might give something practical to his wife or girlfriend. After my parents had a fight my dad returned with groceries and a crate of peaches, each peach sat in green tissue paper. There must have been eight of them and each peach looked like a present. It was his way of asking for forgiveness. My friend's boyfriend gave her flannel pajamas for Valentine's day. When I write of romantic relationships I tie it to the Earth. It's not something I consciously do. It just happens.

**Ray:** Can you talk about this attention to landscape that is present in Native American literature, specifically in your writing?

**Tohe:** When I was writing *No Parole Today* I was looking over some of the poems I've written about my early relationships with boys in high school (I only had two) and I noticed they took place within the landscape. Love for the land becomes entwined with romantic love. We have a language for the land but we don't necessarily have a language for romantic love. In fact, to openly show affection for a spouse in front of others, particularly the in-laws, is inappropriate. On the other hand, it's okay to openly show affection to family members. I know of the experience of loving the Earth and through this experience I can speak of romantic love. The last poem I wrote called "At Mexican

Springs” tells about being part of the Earth where security, comfort, and identity are derived. I believe part of our identity as Navajo people comes from our homeland and our kinship ties, as well as our language.

**Ray:** Is that one of the big differences between traditional Western writing and Native American writing? What separates these two? Is there a separation?

**Tohe:** In terms of writing about landscape, I think there is a difference. Writers that come from a tribal tradition that express the Earth as living, creative, and providing humans with our basic human needs are seen in the works of Rex Lee Jim, Luci Tapahonso, Simon Ortiz, and Elizabeth Cook Lynn. It’s been said many times before that we are responsible for the Earth and to the Earth. We are her children. The Earth is part of our spirituality. For many of the southwestern Indian nations, the creation stories tell of emerging from a particular place on the Earth. Navajo people still bury their children’s umbilical stem to ensure the child’s connection to the Earth. “Traditional western writing” treats the Earth externally. The Earth is something to be domesticated, bought, sold, developed, and exploited for profit and gain. It’s the American Dream to own land and it’s often taken at the cost of displacing indigenous people and animals.

**Ray:** Writers such as yourself and Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) and Luci Tapahonso (*Diné*) have often been categorized as “Southwest writers.” How do you define a “Southwest writer” or “Southwest literature”? Is this something that only emerges and can only be written in the Southwest by people from this region, or, is there something else that defines a “Southwestern tradition” of literature?

**Tohe:** I think there is always a tendency to pigeon-hole people. It happens all the time even here at the university. Writers and people are put into categories or pigeon-holes which is very much a part of the way our academic circles are formed. Students major in one area and stick to that. It serves identification purposes to say, “he’s a Southwestern writer.” But do people ever say, “he’s a Pacific writer or a

Great Lakes writer?”

**Ray:** Yes, I think there is this tendency to label something by saying, “This is Native American literature.” But, does this necessarily have to be written by Native Americans? Or is there something else? I think the labeling is done out of convenience.

**Tohe:** Yes.

**Ray:** Are you familiar with Tony Hillerman?

**Tohe:** Yes, I know some of his work.

**Ray:** What do you think about someone like him, a non-native person, attempting to capture Navajo culture?

**Tohe:** When I lived in the Midwest, in Omaha, working on my Graduate degree I used to do readings and people in the audience most often associated me with Tony Hillerman. At the end of my readings always the question “What do you think of Tony Hillerman?” would arise. I was telling my friend this and for graduation he gave me a button that said, “Please don’t ask me about Tony Hillerman.” I used to wear it at my readings. I think that he writes for a specific audience, he has a formula that he follows and he knows his audience and what they want. He satisfies that, he is read all over the world.

**Ray:** What about non-native critics of your work and Native American literature in general? How do you react to this criticism?

**Tohe:** You know, I haven’t seen one review of my book. So, I really don’t know.

**Ray:** Is this because you haven’t come across these reviews, or do they simply not exist?

**Tohe:** I don’t know if anybody is reviewing it or not.

**Ray:** Could this be because it is relatively new?

**Tohe:** It could be because of that, because it does take a little time for it to get into print and be circulated. But I really don’t know what people are saying about it. The only way I can gauge the reaction is when I go out and do readings and get audience comments.

**Ray:** Since you are a teacher or educator, how do you feel that as educators we should teach Native American literature?

**Tohe:** First of all, you have to put it in some sort of context or framework in order for the students to understand and appreciate it. Otherwise, they will be comparing it to the literature that they are familiar with and I don't think they would get a full appreciation of why this literature has different dimensions to it. I always start out by giving some contextual framework of what is important to Native people.

**Ray:** In doing research I've come across a number of people who say that there exists a sort of tight-knit community of Native American authors that feed off of each other or borrow certain ideas and styles from one another. Do you see this?

**Tohe:** I guess I'm not part of this circle because I didn't know it existed. When I was beginning to write, I borrowed a style from a certain Native American writer. I don't think writing in the style of a writer whose work you admire is necessarily a bad thing if you're a beginning writer. Beginning writers are looking for their voice. It's kind of like using training wheels until you can ride on your own. Writers and artists are always borrowing, being influenced, and inspired by other artists. I've "borrowed" Navajo oral literature. I've heard stories that I've used in poems and stories. Not everything I write happened to me personally. I've had mentors such as Simon Ortiz who has been a supporter of my work when I started to write; he continues to give me that support. Writing can be a lonely business when you're isolated at your computer. I need my writer friends to bounce ideas off and sometimes to share our work with each other. A writer like no one else knows the business and the demands of writing.

**Ray:** What writers do you admire or draw this inspiration from? Who are your influences?

**Tohe:** Well, I really like Pablo Neruda, and also Sandra Cisneros. I am also really interested in Asian literature. Stories drawn from my family's oral tradition have also influenced me.

**Ray:** At a recent conference in Utah I spoke with Ortiz and

one of the things he mentioned was this emergence of very young Native American writers, like Ester Belin and Sherwin Bitsui, are you familiar with these people?

**Tohe:** No.

**Ray:** Are there up and coming Native writers out there?

**Tohe:** I think so. I'm working on this and co-edited a Native women's anthology with Hyde Erdrich and we finished the selections of who to include in this anthology. What we noticed is that most of the writers that were represented were Navajo and Annisinabe or Ojibway. So we were talking about that and one of the things we noticed is for example on the Navajo reservation there are lots of writing workshops and a push to have writing workshops for high school kids. I was just up at Red Mesa working with high school students. There are a lot of very good writers there. If they are interested and with the right encouragement they could be the next Pulitzer Prize winner. I was also part of the Navajo writers camp at Rough Rock, AZ. I think there is a lot of activity like that going on the Navajo reservation and I think it's really important that we encourage that and even to consider writing as a career. We will see more.

**Ray:** Besides the anthology you just mentioned do you currently have any works in progress?

**Tohe:** Yes. In the spring I am going on sabbatical and I have this larger book tentatively called *Talking Women*. I have a lot of the stories and poems written for that already but I still have to put it into some sort of coherent order. I plan to finish that book and send it out. I've also been asked to publish a book through one of the smaller presses in Nebraska, but I don't know what the name of that one is going to be yet.

**Ray:** Great, I look forward to it.

**Tohe:** One of the things Sherman Alexie said in his new book, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, is "What do Navajo's look like when they are naked and in love?" So, I get inspiration from him to write something that will answer that question. In my work I am writing things that

are maybe in some ways erotic, which is something that most Native people don't do. They typically write about grandmothers or something. But I'm not making fun of it, or saying that we shouldn't write about this, but, I hope to do something that is different. Because we are humans, we have all of these different sides to our lives, not just this stoic stereotype that only write about grandmothers and landscape. That is another thing I'm working on now in my book.

At this point, Tohe mentioned that she had to instruct one of her classes and our interview came to an end. It should be mentioned that our interview consisted of many moments of laughter, deep-thought and reflection, and a few moments of silence.

“Sometimes Navajo philosophy comes into conflict with western culture. I'm a contemporary Navajo woman whose foundation is still connected to the homeland and my family there. My writing reflects this theme.”

He said

'Poetry is like

'Poetry is like  
an equation

'An equation  
of human emotion...

Not a mosquito  
emotion.

Not a crocodile  
emotion.

Not even a non-human  
human emotion.

Looking at a flower  
as a butterfly  
or a psychopath  
would do.

Addy fixes cereal for her husband. Joe is a surgeon and on the dot of eight he will hurry into the kitchen. Today when he races down the stairway and in the door, he asks, "What will you be doing with your day today?" She hates that question. She knows that her response will be wrong no matter what. She sidesteps as much as possible and pretends to concentrate on making coffee until he pins her down and demands an answer. Knowing the expression on her face will be revealing, she turns her back and pulls the large clasp from her straight blonde hair. Maybe the hair will hide her distress. The darkness of his glance and his switch of attention to the newspaper tells her he really doesn't care that much—or he already knows the answer to his question. Her emotions swirl like cream in the hot coffee she sips from her mug.

When Joe's car finally pulls away from the curb, Addy breathes a deep sigh. She stands up quickly and does five minutes of deep, cleansing breaths before she rinses the few dishes and sweeps the kitchen.

Today is Addy's day to Choose and she can't wait. She has set aside the entire morning and afternoon for this particularly special venture. This choice is a big one. She hums her favorite tune, "That Old Black Magic," and thinks of the man at the bank, as she takes her boxes out of the guest room closet. She handles each one reverently, feels the fine shape of the six-sided box with the rose pink lid. Then she reads the name of the famous department store on the very old, earring-sized, cardboard box. She caresses an oval box with corrugated sides and a tin box which is a favorite because of its mauve and purple swirls. Addy takes pride in the fact that her boxes are all different: square, rec-

tangular, and octagonal boxes, sturdy cardboard boxes, thin boxes, plastic and wooden boxes, shiny new boxes and antiques.

She stores the smaller boxes inside the large ones so she can keep all of her collection in one closet. Joe insists on this. She lines them up on twin beds in the guest room, one of five bedrooms in their spacious, two-story brick home. The large boxes go in the back row and small in the front. She steps back and draws in a breath of admiration. What a beautiful still life this would make for an artist to paint. She is tempted to take a picture and promises herself to someday photograph each particular treasure. She will make notes about the history of each box to go with the photograph. But for now the project is to decide.

Joe once remarked that a gift bag will do the same thing as a box. Gift bags are a cop-out in Addy's opinion. Of course they're easy. Odd shapes are easier to wrap in a bag. Wrapping paper isn't necessary. But with a gift bag, the top hangs open. Addy always feels insecure with such a bag. It's an unfinished kind of feeling—like having on no bra, or having a nightgown on with no panties, or riding in the car with no seat belt. It is the way she felt for a long time about having no children. Joe had made it clear before marriage that he wasn't the "father" type and would be just as happy with no children. She didn't agree, but was sure that he would someday change his mind. He didn't. Now her mother insists these boxes are Addy's children.

To accompany her boxes, Addy keeps different kinds of wrapping paper, scissors, ribbon and Scotch tape all together in the bottom drawer of a dresser between the

beds. The drawer is not neat or organized. But everything Addy needs is there. Joe complains that she is sloppy, but her tight, creased jeans that she irons and the crisp man's shirt she often wears are evidence that he is wrong. What difference if the drawer is jumbled! She can find everything she wants, thank you, Joe.

This search for the right box is Addy's passion and hobby. She routinely chooses a box before choosing a gift. Once Joe called her obsessive and suggested she let him choose the appropriate box. When she adamantly refused, he called her stubborn. Then he suggested she call in a neighbor or her mother for advice. Addy explained that the choice must be hers alone. If someone else makes the selection, she's all boxed in again. When she told him that, he laughed, and said she had a weird sense of humor. Then he went back to his football game on TV.

Sometimes Joe protests that since she works part-time, she should just buy a new box whenever she needs it. He reminds her that she doesn't really have to work at "that pitiful little part-time job": She is not about to quit the job which enables her to add to the box collection. She enjoys working at Ricker's Gifts. Joe would have a heart attack if she told him she still had a dream of having her own gift shop. He would never sign for her to borrow the needed money. She knows that because she asked him one time. He had lectured her. "You must be going through early menopause. You have the craziest ideas. Why would you want to tie yourself down to your own business? I have enough money for both of us. You have everything you want." Addy started to try to explain to Joe that something was missing, that she was going to the bank on her own,

but when she got ready to speak, Joe was reading his medical journal.

Joe doesn't understand and she has almost stopped caring. His understanding is no longer important, just like her mother's advice is no longer important. They would never comprehend that it's the feel of the box that counts, the fit of the box which determines the rightness. There must be contact on all of the four sides. There must be skin touching her skin, smooth and sensual, a tactile softness, a satin-like quality.

As she considers the choices before her, she has a fuzzy memory of how warm and cozy she felt with Joe long ago when they were dating. He was a surgical resident while she was working in the hospital lab. He said he overheard her laughing with a friend about trying to hide some pot from a prissy roommate and when he turned to look, he fell immediately for her blonde hair and blue eyes. She hardly remembers what she fell for. She was young and her friends were impressed that handsome Joe chose to go out with her. She cooked for him and he loved that. He made her feel safe. After the wedding she stayed home, decorated the house, prepared gourmet meals, entertained his friends and hoped for the pregnancy that never happened. Joe liked having her at home so she gave up her career and became active in the Medical Auxiliary plus a few other volunteer stints. As the years passed, she gave up these activities and started working part-time. All along the way she collected her boxes.

After the box shape and according to the specific occasion, Addy selects the paper color. A color either works or it doesn't. She would never use rosy pink, for instance,

to wrap a dictionary, or to wrap up in on a dreary day when the sound of the phone ringing gives her a headache and when the dirty dishes in the sink begin to frown. Nor would she use silver. It just wouldn't fit the mood. Her favorite color today is blue, and since Roger, the loan officer at the bank, complimented her beautiful blue eyes, why not use a midnight blue tissue topped with starry gold paper?

Now for the Choosing. Addy gets into one box after the other, trying each one for size. One is so large that she can't decide how to spread her body inside so that there's contact with the sides. She gets lost in the space of it. One rubs a blister on her toe because of its snug fit. One makes her mother nervous because of its weird, long and narrow shape. "Looks like a coffin," her mother observes when she drops by unannounced, just long enough to make one of her critical comments. She reminds herself that mother is always negative.

Addy curls up in box after box, wrinkling and ruining a pile of paper as she tries to find the perfect fit. She experiments with and without clothing. Which feels more secure but the extra bulk always makes the lid too tight. She ruins piles of midnight blue tissue, trying for a correct fit. She cries in frustration and the tissue fades onto her skin, leaving weird patches of blue on her fingers and her slightly pointy nose.

In a click of clarity, she remembers a pretty carved wooden box on her husband's desk. The box top is hinged with ornate antique brass hinges. When she tries it, it is neither too restrictive nor too loose. The velvet box lining is very comfortable. Addy rests for a few minutes before tack-

ling the starry gold paper wrapping. It has been a tiring procedure.

When Joe arrives home, Addy is asleep in the box, starry paper half pulled over her like a mussed blanket. He goes to the phone and calls her mother. "She's lying here dead in a velvet-lined wooden box, Jean, already turning blue. It's awful."

"Get off the phone and stop moaning." Addy sits upright and puts her hands on her knees. "You know how I always search for the right box. Today I finally found this one. There's plenty of space. I'm secure. I don't feel boxed in."

"No, Joe, I have not fixed your dinner, yet. We're going out to celebrate my new business, Comfortable Gifts. In the mail yesterday was a letter from Women's Bank in the Four Lane Shopping Center. They have agreed to give me a small business loan."

Addy doesn't tell Joe that Roger, the loan officer, is a very attractive bachelor and that next week she plans to take him up on his invitation to meet for dinner in a nearby motel. Of course she doesn't tell Joe that the box is for Roger.

While dressing for dinner, she suddenly realizes that a gift wrapped in this particular box might be a mistake. Perhaps any gift at this stage of the game would be a mistake. Perhaps she will just leave the box on Joe's desk, as a sort of reminder.

Most of *Thin Air's* staff is already spread thin by school related responsibilities, such as teaching, learning, and the publication of this beloved journal, but many of our staff members also found time this semester to give back to the community. On Friday, May 4, *Thin Air* magazine hosted the second annual ***Thin Air/New Start Creative Writing Workshop*** for middle school students. Our members teamed up with twenty-three 6th through 8th grade students from New Start Middle School (located in Flagstaff, AZ). The students took turns participating in six creative writing activities. One activity encouraged students to write a creative story explaining tabloid headlines, such as "Sacred Pool Cures Sick But Is Full of Crocodiles" and "Lack of Sleep is Turning Us Into a Nation of Zombies." Another activity highlighted lines from already published poets, such as Shakespeare and Charles Bukowski, and the students were asked to write a poem using one or more of the borrowed lines for inspiration. Each student participated in the activities while collecting a creative portfolio of their work.

In order to celebrate the talents of these students and the success of this event, our staff decided to showcase some of the original poems written by the New Start students during the workshop. Of course, we'd like to publish every student who participated, but we only have space for seven poems. Regardless of who was chosen for publication, all the students deserve recognition for their involvement in the event. The New Start students who participated were: Jose Abrego, Cody Alfonso, Jessica Almendarez, Manuel Barajas, Cornell Begay, Jeremy Clark, Tony Fuqua, Devin Fredericks, Andrea Garza, Seffen Honahni, Monti Jackson, Andrew Juarez, Andrew Lafferty, Dulce Madrid, Cynthia Manychildren, Michael McCoy, Bryan Mullen, Tyler Neff, Scarlett Riskin, Kimie Slim, Brian Tohannie, Ely Villas, and Eric Yazzie. With the help of their teacher, Diane Sohm, the students were able to leave the classroom for a day to experience the academic ambiance of Northern Arizona University's mountain campus.

### Jeremy Clark

#### "Not Always What You Think"

There's a burnt room, and the pot roast in the oven is burning.

Death wants more death, and its webs are full.

Aren't you tired of the tundra of the mind?

Buy medication, the all-safe ingredients, but watch for the bus.

The spiders, the kitties. What was I saying? I don't know.

The mind can't think when drowning in thoughts.

Satisfaction is not always what you think.

### Devin Fredericks

#### "Mother, Drinking"

Mother is drinking to forget a man.

Man, she can chug out of that beer can.

She ran out of beer, so she got some gin.

Damn, she's chuggin' out of that bottle again.

Out of gin, what the hell can she do?

She's drunk off her ass; her face is turning blue.

She decides to go for a drive.

When she gets back, I hope she's alive.

**Andrea Garza**  
"Dark"

The angels are crying,  
and I feel like dying.  
The clouds are the color of my silver necklace.  
Oh, why do I always feel so reckless?  
Dangerous minds do dangerous things.  
I can kill you, and you can try to redeem.  
Because life is a mystery, and you'll never  
know the meaning of it, until you're history.

**Monti Jackson**  
"Cookie Jar"

Help me, help me, there are no more cookies.  
I saw a cookie jar. I ran and ran.  
Got on a track field. Saw some hurdles. Tried to be cool.  
Ran the hurdles. Jumped one, jumped two, three.  
I tripped over and fell on my face.  
I got up and ran more, then I stopped.  
Saw this girl.  
Forgot my cookies.  
I fell for the trick.

**Bryan Mullen**  
"Sleep"

Sleep is like my favorite food.  
I hear nothing.  
I see cars.  
It is like chocolate milk.  
I like blue.

**Scarlett Riskin**  
"Cats"

Concentrating, effortlessly on little dust specks in the air.  
All things joyful and wonderful in a furry little animal.  
Too beautiful and graceful to understand.  
Sophistication beyond human comprehension.

**Ely Villas**  
"Answer the Phone"

Answer the phone.  
It might be my girl.  
I miss her and haven't  
talked to her for three weeks.  
I need her, and want her, to  
hear her voice before I  
lose her. Lost her before, don't  
want it again.  
Now answer the phone.

Once, fifteen years ago when she was young sixty, my mother visited me in Chicago. She came to the Big Onion from her comfortable Michigan suburb to see her grandchildren and watch my brother run a triathlon. She never said it, but I know that talking to me on the phone was always enough for her because I didn't change as quickly as my growing children did and, since my brother did enough exercise for the whole family, she certainly didn't have to be concerned about seeing me achieve my "personal best." In short, I knew my role as her first-born: I was to be duty-bound and not expect too much.

My mother wanted to go to the Shedd Aquarium, so we made a day of it. It was a favorite of my children and the huge coral reef tank was still new enough to be an attraction. At first, we each went to our favorite exhibits. My older child set off toward the crustaceans and my son and I searched for a shark. Of course, all of us did plenty of browsing, too. In the midst of exhibits featuring huge thin gar, gliding sea turtles, eerily-lit, floating anemones, and lurking morays, we finally found my mother in a hall which humbly housed dozens of small tanks.

She stood in the dark in front of one, squinting at the descriptive sign and waiting with infinite patience for the slightest sign of life from a tiny sea horse. At each ripple and consequent movement of the animal, she leaned toward the glass. I didn't know it then, but she was trying to catch a telling glimpse of a hidden wire, motorized mobilizer or any indication of a ruse played on earnest, entry-fee-paying patrons. I finally approached her.

"Come out and see the diver feed the fish in the coral reef tank."

She seemed a bit startled; then she looked embarrassed. We walked out to jockey a view of the vibrant and sprightly tropical fish as they frolicked to the most stimulating moment of their day.

"Just fine," was her response to my question

about whether she liked it. "It's almost as good as seeing fish from a glass-bottomed boat in Jamaica." She had traveled to Negril with her best friend, Anne, a year or two before.

After several hours and a meal of questionable museum food accompanied by childish jokes about the ingredients and their possible relationship to some failed exhibit, we began the forty-minute trip home. During the drive my mother was uncharacteristically quiet. I thought she was tired. Then an out-of-context question interrupted my children's chatter.

"Are all the fish and sea animals at the aquarium real?"

I was puzzled. "Do you mean 'alive?'"

"No, I mean actual animals that exist in the wild."

"Well, yes," I ventured, thinking I knew what she meant. "Of course, there are the decorative items like mobiles, models, and wall hangings but they are not actually live exhibits." My mother's eyesight was poor even then and I thought this might be the source of her query. "What are you thinking of?"

"I know the shells and plastic models aren't real, of course, but the exhibits, the things in the tanks, they are all real animals?"

I assured her that they were. Then my tendency toward perfectionism and her inability to accept anything but complete accuracy gnawed at me.

"Occasionally, to make the exhibit environment look more natural, they may add an exoskeleton of a starfish or a background drawing of other animals, but they aren't meant to look alive or real, certainly not to deceive. They just add to the overall setting."

This information, rather than bringing clarity, seemed to add to a growing frustration.

"The sea horses," she said. "Are they real?"

"Yes," I answered confidently, then "Had one of them died and not been removed from the tank?"

My mother didn't answer right away, then she said quietly, "No, I just didn't think they were real animals."

I was a little confused, even astounded. "You mean that they didn't exist?"

She nodded. I could see her body withdraw a little with shame.

My mother was always proud of what she knew and it was considerable. Most of it had not been learned in school and an enormous amount had not been forgotten. Although she would never admit it, she is as hard on herself as she is on others when it comes to the accuracy of facts. I admire her fairness in this.

There was a long pause in which I was very proud of my children's silence. To the younger one, everything seemed real because of his age and active imagination. My older one had memorized every book on aquatic life she could get her hands on. She probably could have written a factual piece on sea horses just from the top of her head. It was their sensitivity and love of their grandmother that engendered their lack of comment.

I tried to adjust my tone and formulate an answer. "Yes, sea horses do exist. I think they're very hard to keep in captivity and the Shedd is proud of their tiny exhibit. I don't know how large they get or where their habitat is."

"Oh," she said. We rode on quietly and in a while began to talk about another topic.

For years I tried to get my mind around what that day must have been like for her. Taken to an institution of science where people learn facts, theories, and view the natural wonders of faraway lands, she had come upon a mythical creature. It was as if one were to visit the zoo and in the exhibit next to the camel, there were a pair of unicorns. You might feel defrauded, as if your admission to the zoo-

logical gardens had somehow put you in contact with Ripley or Ringling Brothers instead. Then, since there was no crowd around the fence, no additional fee to view this phenomenon, you might begin to doubt your assumption, your entire frame of reference.

Maybe you had missed the hot newsday when unicorns were discovered in the Amazon. You might have ignored the fact that this exhibit was vying with Disneyland for family vacations. Even giant pandas paled by comparison. These unicorns, you might speculate, brought in millions of dollars of revenue, allowing for the breeding of many other rare, far less glamorous species like a barely visible, nocturnal vole. Yes, you had been high-functioning, but had somehow missed the entire occurrence and gone on living as if a knowledge of unicorns came exclusively from the muse inspiring some medieval tapestry.

So here you were, alone in your ignorance, blinking, cleaning your glasses, and stamping your feet to relieve tired legs while your incredulous gaze could not get enough. That must have been what it was like for my tiny red-haired mother, who thought she had a working knowledge of the world around her, as she stood in front of the sea horse tank that day.

Last Mother's Day, she came back for another visit. This time her vision was a little worse, but I held her hand or she took my arm, and we went back to the Shedd Aquarium. When we entered and paid our fee, she wished the woman at the register a "Happy Mother's Day." Then in answer to my question, she said, "Let's look at the sea horses, otters, and the new whale exhibit."

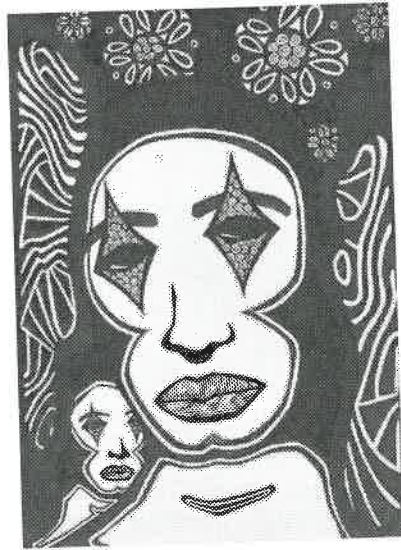
It was crowded, but she was determined to view her highlights in the most efficient way possible. I read the categories to her from the map. "Sea horses are salt water," she was saying, "and Australia or other warm waters are their home." With this information, we found the tank in

a few minutes. Unfortunately, it was covered and not open for viewing. "Maybe this is mating season," I offered.

"Too bad," she said. "Did you know that the males actually give birth to the young?" I remarked how that would fulfill the dream of many a young mother. We then found the river otters; my mother loved them for their playfulness, but it was at the Beluga Whale pool that she was happiest.

She stood in silence watching them cavort as if they were not as heavy as they are. Perhaps because she had been there so long, one came very close to her, gave her a sidelong glance from its clear eye set in an angular head. It then gave out a loud characteristic call, a kind of chirping whistle. I'm sure it was meant for her.

This time my mother got tired after only two hours. On the drive home, neither of us mentioned the first time we'd been to the aquarium, but I couldn't help being distracted by that memory as she talked about the wonders of the Beluga Whales and how they differed from Orcas.



Seth Johnson  
Ink on paper  
8.5 x 11 inch

Drama King

Neck bones scale the life tree fragile as fire,  
compressing the thoughts passing through the stalk  
that would scramble everything wanted  
by big-boned bodies, loco for motion.

The stuck-out neck's best suited for small talk  
and sniffing fright, aiming itself for flight.  
But charging mercenary rank and file  
ripple down the firing line blind and dumb

as new recruits who've yet to earn their wings  
with others' blood and bones. When neck hairs rise  
to blind-side motion threatening as a hawk's  
talons before they gouge the throat and guts

of shaded prey, flesh ignores the brain's sweet lies  
and goes along, its philosophy sweat—  
brine for stronger connections and water  
for dilution. The mind catches up in time.

And when fingers play the bones down the back  
the neck funnels the charge to the waiting  
heart and crotch, and every synapse pleads  
for blood and power, the mind working overtime.

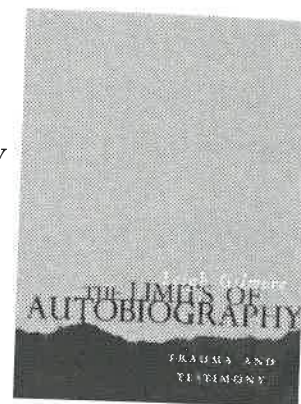


Seth Johnson

Ink on paper  
4 x 3 inch

Chakra Totem

Leigh Gilmore  
*The Limits of Autobiography*  
Cornell University Press  
\$16.95



Riding the recent wave of confessional, often fictionalized accounts of personal trauma, Leigh Gilmore seeks out the boundaries of autobiography in her new book, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Gilmore devotes individual chapters to four texts, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out Of Carolina*, Mikal Gilmore's *Shot in the Heart*, the serialized autobiography of Jamaica Kincaid, and Jeanette Winterson's *Written On The Body*. The author prefaces these chapters with an initial foray into earlier biographical works by Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser. For Gilmore, each of these texts represents a limit-case, an autobiography which probes the boundary of self-representation. Gilmore's central premise stipulates that autobiography is inherently paradoxical.

Autobiography, Gilmore writes, contains an

Facing an Autobiographical Paradox

Mary Anderson

inherent contradiction that complicates self-representation. Autobiography demands “that the autobiographer be both unique and representative” (Gilmore 8); the text must engage because it is not and, simultaneously, is us. Maintaining the paradoxical balance of self-representation places the writer in an untenable position, forcing him or her to expand or penetrate the permeable boundaries of “objective” truth. Gilmore’s limit-case examinations propose that truth, especially in the context of memory, may not intersect with objectivity. “Truth” and “objectivity” move in separate, though not opposite, directions in these works, and Gilmore’s introduction may remind one of a similar treatment of “truth” and “objectivity” in Tim O’Brien’s short story, “How To Tell a True War Story” found in his confessional *The Things They Carried*. Questions of “factual” truth plague both authors. Unlike O’Brien’s collection of self-revelatory, first-person narratives, however, Gilmore’s text examines the autobiographies of others, placing each text along a continuum of increasing opacity. As the author moves from Allison’s *Bastard*, which is admittedly autobiographical, to Winterson’s *Written*, which refuses any identification of the narrator, she also moves through the constraints and adaptations endemic to each project. Personal trauma arising

from family violence, social impositions, and lesbian sexuality force the writers to adopt varying distances from the text.

Gilmore’s use of theoretical jargon in her lengthy introduction may discourage readers unfamiliar with the syntactically and semantically dense works of Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan. The daunting introduction is particularly unfortunate because the reader who abandons the text, exasperated by an initial attempt, will miss an engaging discussion of self-representation. Subsequent chapters place the theorists and critics at the edge of the text and focus on each autobiography under scrutiny. After laying an unnecessarily complex foundation, Gilmore successfully applies her ideas of self-representation to each work, explaining the boundaries encountered in each limit-case and the trauma which led the author to approach these boundaries. The strong theoretical influence makes this book a text only for those readers familiar with literary theory or who possess a high tolerance for difficult terminology. Yet, Gilmore’s examination is entertaining and is a valuable contribution to theories of self-representation.

**Talal Al-Zied** belongs to the ISA Crew; a combination of graffiti artists from different backgrounds with different styles. Al-Zied and his crew began painting in 1998 in Rome, Italy and are now a well known crew of artists worldwide.

**Frances W. Burch** started writing about eight years ago and can't stop. In the third half of Burch's life, she invested in a "room of her own" and almost everyday she writes there or at home in preparation for a wonderful critique group which helps her stay on target.

**Alex Campbell's** work has appeared most recently in *Wellspring* and *Japanophile*. African kings and custodians are among her cherished friends. She has lived or traveled in more than half the U.S. states, Japan, four European countries, as well as West Africa. Her deepest roots are in Chicago.

**Alan Catlin** has published over forty chapbooks of prose and poetry. he expects his Selected Poems to be published by Pavement Saw in late 2001.

**Earl Coleman** turned to writing full-time about eight years ago after a lengthy career in publishing. He has been published in over 300 literary journals and was nominated for Pushcart XXIII.

**Nora Edwards** is a first year student in the M.F.A. program in poetry at the University of Notre Dame. She received her undergraduate

degree in English from the Ohio State University. Nora is originally from Lewisburg, West Virginia. This is her first publication. The poem is based on her friend Raymie, who would like the public to know that he is single and very hot.

**Daniel John** was born in Saskatchewan, Canada but now resides in Brookline, MA. He has worked as a dancer, movement and massage therapist, poet, web page writer, actor, playwright, and landscape designer. He is also active in the Boston play-writing community and has performed locally as an actor, singer, and poet. Daniel John has nine children. His essay, "Scattering Death," was recently published in the April 2001 issue of *Rio Grande Review*.

**Seth Johnson** currently resides in Flagstaff, AZ and describes himself as a "twenty-nine year old, self-proclaimed king of my own style, man with a plan to create in any way I can...."

**Scott Kelly** currently works at Popelka Glass Studio in Door County, Wisconsin where he works with both blown and cast glass. Kelly recently collaborated with Dakota Witzenburg on the installation, "Hermetic Evection" at the 2000 Burning Man Art Festival.

**Richard Krause** lives in Somerset, KY, teaches at the local community college, and writes mainly short stories and epigrams. His writing has appeared in such magazines as *American Poetry*

*Review, Confrontation, Painted Bride Quarterly, The Prose Poem, and American Writing.* Krause is also anticipating being published in the upcoming issues of *The Crescent Review* and *Colleges and Bricolages*.

**André Lang-Herfurth**, born and raised in Hamburg, Germany, is currently living in Denver, CO where he is pursuing his MBA and Master of Science in Management and Communication degrees. He holds a BS in Business with a minor in Arts Management and continues to pursue oil painting in order to, one day, get involved with the art industry.

Originally from back east, and living in Tucson for almost two decades, **Nalisha Rangel** has become fascinated with the ambiance of the desert. Rangel has a deep appreciation for Southwestern art and has developed, through the years, a style uniquely her own. Incorporating the awesome shapes of the diverse landscapes with the natural tones and colors of the desert Rangel finds painting a relaxing past-time. She also has a great love for animals, especially reptilian life, which she occasionally adds to her pieces for a touch of continuity. Rangel finds the colors she chooses to apply in her work help signify the frame of mind she is in while painting, and perhaps sets a mood for her audience as well.

**Megan Riley** is an "Ohioan" currently living in Washington, DC. She is in the process of com-

pleting her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Maryland.

**Virginia Schnurr** has an interest in the word and art that has guided her life. She has spent time as a Vista Volunteer teaching Spanish-American children to read and has also encouraged them to paint. She ran a literary magazine in a Quaker boarding school. Her work has appeared in *Kalliope* and *Peregrine*. She has forthcoming work in journals such as *Primavera, Astarte, Confluence, Eureka* and *Worcester Review*.

**Michael S. Smith** lives in Bloomington, Illinois. Several hundred of his poems and two-dozen of his stories have appeared in over 150 journals and anthologies, most recently *The Chattahoochee Review, The Mid-America Poetry Review, Writers Forum, Chiron Review, The Ledge, Poem* and *S.L.U.G.fest*, and he has read on the NPR program *Open Forum: Theme and Variations*. He supports his writing work with a job managing the insurance department of an international agricultural cooperative.

**Virgil Suárez** was born in Havana, Cuba in 1962. Since 1974 he has lived in the United States. He is the author of four novels, *The Cutter, Latin Jazz, Havana Thursdays, and Going Under*, and the collection of stories, *Welcome to the Oasis*. His memoirs, *Spared Angola: Memories of a Cuban-American Childhood* and *Café Nostalgia: Writings from the Hyphen*, chronicle his life of exile in both

Cuba and the United States. He is also the author of four collections of poetry: *Garabato Poems*, *You Come Singing*, *In the Republic of Longing*, and *Palm Crows*, forthcoming this year from the University of Arizona Press in its prestigious "Camino del Sol" Series. As editor he has published the best-selling anthologies: *Iguana Dreams: New Latino Fiction* and *Paper Dance: 55 Latino Poets*. Also forthcoming are three new anthologies: *American Diaspora* (Iowa University Press, 2001), *Like Thunder: Poets Respond to Violence in America*, and *Clockpunchers: Poetry of the American Work Place*. He wrote the film script *The End of the Game* for Leon Ichaso, a Cuban-American director, and has adapted several of his novels into scripts. He divides his time between Miami and Tallahassee where he lives with his family, and is currently at work on his new novel *Sonny Manteca's Blues*, and a new collection of poems. He is a Professor of Creative Writing at Florida State University.

**Laura Tohe** is Diné (Navajo). She was born and raised on the Navajo reservation. She is Associate Professor in the English department at Arizona State University. She has written two books of poetry. *No Parole Today* received the Poetry of the Year Award from the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. She writes essays, stories, and children's plays. Her work appears in Canada and Europe. Tohe is currently working on a book of poetry and stories called *Talking Women*.

**Mary Winter's** poetry has appeared in the *Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry*; *Cimarron Review*; *Commonweal*; *Gulf Coast*; *Quarterly West*; *Seneca Review* (whose editor nominated her poem for a Pushcart Prize); and *Washington Square*. She has poems forthcoming in *Hurricane Alice*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *ONTHEBUS*. Mary was a featured poet in the Palanquin Press pamphlet series; two of her chapbooks were contest prize winners. She recently contributed a retrospective chapbook to Pudding House's "Greatest Hits!" series. Her book *A Pocket History of the World* was published by Nightshade Press. After working as a lawyer, Mary is currently studying at Columbia University to become a reading specialist.



Rites of Passage

Seth Johnson  
Ink on paper  
8.5 x 11 inch

**Richard Krause**

I try to get that slant or insight that'll unlock another world. Sometimes an experience is so overwhelming, like unusual shortness, that my own inadequacies are easily able to key into it. Sustaining a work of art is like sustaining an erection, only the wooden gods can do it indefinitely. There is a difference between art as catharsis, and trying to wash your dirty laundry in it. The latter is possible, but only by those whose motives are spotless.

**Becca Cuyler**

Design, physics, understanding life and phenomena, all pieces of how our world is lived...we can but capture bits of these. We call them moments; these are our snapshots. I collect these moments of phenomena, of a world lived, embracing both the beauty and the chaos.

**Daniel John**

My standard of aesthetics is sentience. I want to be able to have an intelligent conversation with a work of art. Being inspired or inspiring is not enough. I want art that keeps talking back in different voices and from deeper layers of meaning. Even if we have only met once. Among many others, Van Gogh's "Starry Nights", a Zen garden in Japan, and "Gloria" choreographed by Mark Morris will be talking back to me until the day I have no ears.

**Alex Campbell**

The highest aesthetic benchmark requires rewrites which pare down a piece to its most crisp and spare form. I strive for a kind of Bauhaus quality where "less is more," thus the work that takes longer to write has the fewest words.

**Frances Burch**

Just letting it happen is my preferred way of writing. I start with a mere word or a sentence and proceed onto the void of a blank piece of paper, having no preconceived idea of where I'm going. If I'm lucky the unconscious voice and the wisdom of the old crone will provide me with words that make a good story. Then I rework and revise, always keeping a large part of the original, until its ready for publication.

**Laura Tohe**

From a western viewpoint, aesthetics applied to literature means a work of art that is meaningful, touches us and has the power to change our humanity; it is inspiring, and uses language to bring it all together. Language is the medium through which aesthetics is created and appreciated. Aesthetics is beauty and a work of art. It is necessary for our lives.

**Matthew Ray**

Saying as little as possible to convey the deepest meaning; that is aesthetics. It is something so meaningful that it hurts in a good way.

**Virgil Mathes**

When I think of an aesthetic, I think quite naturally of style. I do not mean this in a reductive sense of the word, but rather as an understanding of style being the natural outgrowth of a principled approach to art. Content influences form, and form restricts and directs content. The style in which a painter applies his medium affects the manner in which it is apprehended by the audience, and the same is true of literature. Everything from staunch genre characters to idiosyncratic word choice affects the overall aesthetic and helps to either engage or distance a reader from the aesthetic considerations of the artists. When one speaks of style (or an aesthetic) it presupposes certain conditions or conventions in the production or presentation of an aesthetic object, and in these conventions lie the underwritten philosophy. For instance, to speak of an aesthetic object itself applies restrictions and conditions upon what class of thing may be considered; people are out, unless they are reduced to an objectified status. What a pity; people are some of the most aesthetically complex 'objects' I encounter.

**Adam V. Wagner**

Laugh everyday; cry, if possible. Look upon a pinion-juniper system as upon a Star Trek planet. A rhinoceros is a strange bird. Open your door to death, our long lost journeyman. Wrap your arms around a foreign language that may in fact be your own. Read, view, write and paint art that reflects this.

**Tom Henry**

What are aesthetics? I don't even know what this word means. Sounds like something mystical or spiritual.... Or, maybe aesthetics are artistic and creative.... That's it, spiritual and artistic.... Kinda like when I buy a nice red wine, a few sunflowers, and bring a picnic basket full of fine meats and cheeses to a vacant meadow with my girlfriend.... Seeing golden meat next to the golden wheat of the field and a ugly Las Vegas-casino-floor blanket offsetting the textures of this beautiful scene.... Or, perhaps it's stepping back from this mental picture on the paper and really opening your eyes... But, perhaps it's something perverted.... Aes-thetics.... Sounds like "ass" and "hetics" together, implying the ideals of beauty found in a person's ass. I see it's slang on a sandy beach somewhere.... "Hey, man, check out those aesthetics on that one...." "Yep, she got them biggggg, sista aesthetics...." Or, perhaps aesthetics are an alternative form of prosthetic whereby you surgically attach a fake, silicone ass somewhere on your body. A new form of plastic surgery.... "Do you like my new look? I recently had a tummy-tuck and altered my face with aesthetics...." "Oh, I can see where the liposuction helps, but you look like a real head, lady."

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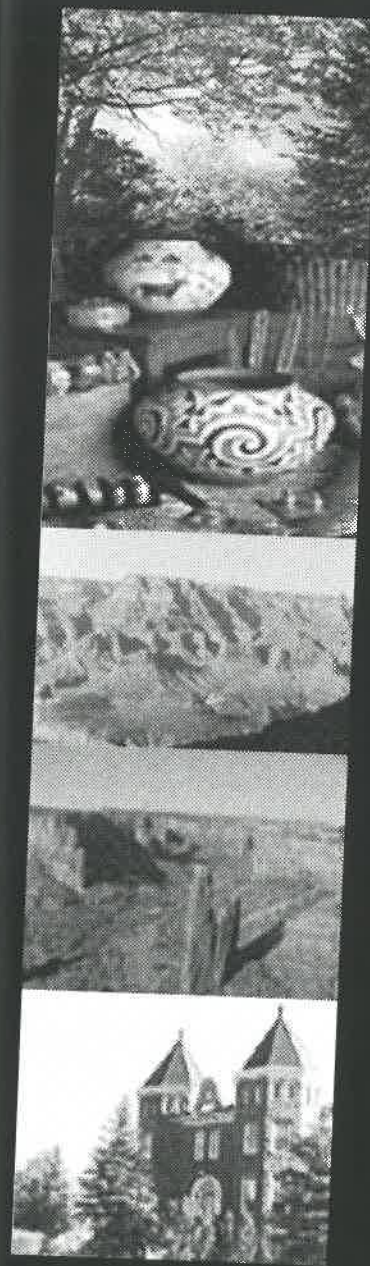
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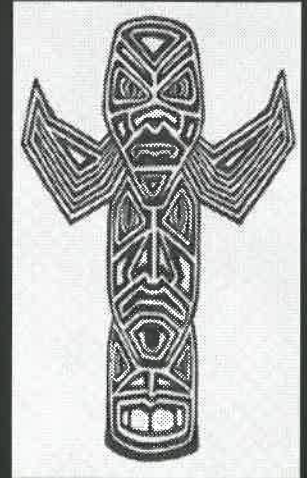
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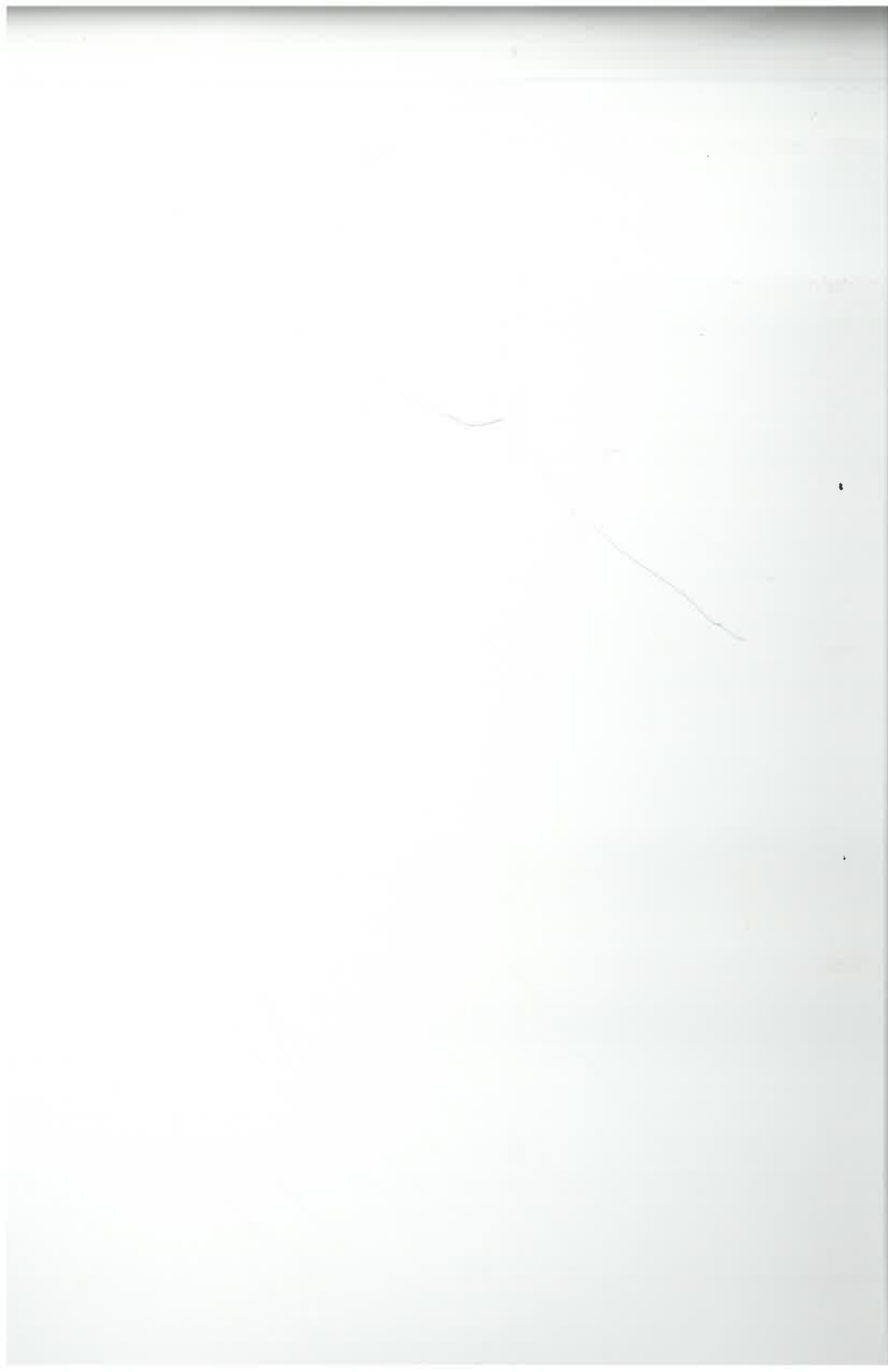
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Disappear Here

Scott Kelly

Color Polaroid of installation  
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