THE HALF-LIFE OF HOME FURNISHING

By

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for Michael Dietz,
and for my Mother
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The twenty-seven poems of this thesis represent the bulk of the work I have done since coming to the University of Florida. Many are formal; the reader will find syllabics, a villanelle, a pantoum, rhymed couplets and approximate blank verse. (The reader will also find at least one abuse of formal logic.) If there is a dominant trend that unites the poems, it may be their tendency to look askance at the quotidian—the preparation, enjoyment, and tidying up after our meals; the trip to the store; the commute to work; the decoration of our surroundings and our childhood memories. Often, a poem will seem to reach out in allusion to history, the exotic, mythology, or nature, but, nearly as often, this gesture is a ruse, and the underlying themes lie closer than ever to home, even the most formal of them tending towards the familiar. Perhaps this is appropriate, suggesting that, at the edge of the universe, what we will find is still the universal.
THE POEM I HAD WRITTEN

After Manuel Bandeira

I wanted the poem I had written to be thus:

a train rolling past a graveyard blanketed in snow,
slowly enough that I can make out the headstone
of Frederick Cruel, 1901-1907.

Instead, it spoke to me, an old man in a tweed jacket,
and, rather than asking about the book I was reading,
wanted to tell me something about Crime and Punishment.
It had nothing to offer but loosely embroidered theories.
When it opened its mouth, the gaps in its teeth unraveled me

and kept me from following the light of the streetlamps falling
on the frost glinting like broken glass in eiderdown.
MONSTROUS WEATHER

I.
On Fuji’s slopes, a mist
cocooned our steps in silk.

II.
Macaques in Nagano
played in the hot springs,
a pale steam rising.

III.
At dawn, the dip of our oars
in the swells hardly disturbed
the giants asleep beneath
the blanket of Tokyo Bay.
THE TRANSMIGRATION OF MARRIAGES

Calhoun smoldered as Jackson raised his glass, averred
Our federal union—it must be preserved!
Sumner inveighed until Brooks applied his cane.
Brown marched to Harper’s with a moldering refrain.
McClellan dawdled on the banks of the Potomac,
muddied his boots, stocked his waterlogged barracks
against Lee. Forrest bloodied and Sherman burned.

In his bedroom, the revenant Lincoln turned
in his pacing, even as Booth tossed in his bed. Both marked
the death-watch: the splintered heartbeat in the dark
that echoes in the bored tunnels of our night.
Having been all, I surrender without a fight.
FUNES, HIS DEATH

After Jorge Luis Borges

No doubt you’ve already heard of Ireneo Funes, whose mind ticked off each minute as it passed faithfully as a clock—and how whatever dam of talent this queer ability leaked out of burst wide open when that bronco threw him, shattering his legs beyond repair. Or maybe you were too deep in your Daredevil comics to remember Funes, but the plot is much the same: the loss of one sense sharpens what remains. In Funes’ case, he found his mind could hold every aspect of every moment of every day he lived thereafter: not just what you said, but a flake of skin on your face, how your fingers tapped a variant of the rhumba on the table, the breeze that suddenly ceased when you said “potato,” the bit of grit encountered in his maté, and the distant bell that chimed once when you paused. He claimed that he could flawlessly relive an entire day, and that the reliving itself took an entire day—but this is hard to credit: a complete map of the world, to be worth anything, would have to be larger than the world itself. Those who knew him said he never made much use of his gift—that he drained it away inventing nonrepeating systems of counting, attaching figures to phrases: “gas,” “the whale,” “a ponchoful of meat”; that he was “incapable of general, platonic ideas,” and of his universe of details, no universals survived his prosaic death of “pulmonary congestion.” But something in his last letter, a quotation of that passage from the Meno or the Phaedo (he, of course, knew; it’s I who don’t remember) that says all knowledge is but recollection, suggests another story. Funes had found that by tugging on the right string in his mind he could draw out the universe in its connections, follow a grain of sugar to its sack,
sack through warehouse, back to wagon, back
to ship, to port, to cane plant and plantation,
and the plaintive singing of slaves whose fingernail dirt
paved the start of an endlessly branching road.
Who knows that Funes didn’t follow it as it forked
into the crow’s foot of an eye scanning some verses
of Latin, and break on the blue-veined marble of her skin—
or suffocate under the infinitesimal terrors
of the drops of rain that spattered on his window.
I must have offered too little
for the mirror.

*The artesano who made it,*
the woman said,
*must have had ten fingers:*

*four on the right hand,*
*six on the left. It is chronicled*

*in the Juchitán folk dance you saw*
*in the Guelaguetza.*

*Surely, he gained his third thumb*
*in a lottery—Babylon’s—*
*and it was fashioned of silver.*

*Fijate, look! How else explain*
*the craftsmanship?*

For emphasis, she kicked the campesino
snoring beneath her market table,

who yelped, and flared out his hands
too quick for me to count the digits
in Spanish or English.

I must not have bought the mirror,
since I don’t have it now.
PRAYER IN REVERSE

Pray now to the objects in the mirror,
as you pause in the drive to watch the garage door close.
Remember they are closer than they appear.

Though only street and mailbox should appear,
do not take for granted what it shows,
but pray now to the objects in the mirror.

If they seem like trompe l’oeil, like a Vermeer,
crisp, but only a picture, as everyone knows,
remember they are closer than they appear,

and also that some things, though real and clear,
refuse to let themselves be so exposed.
Pray now to the objects in the mirror:

girls you’ve passed, and kids placed by your fear
in blind spots where the mirror cannot go.
Remember they may be closer than they appear.

Time to lift your foot. Time to steer
straight back, and let these figments be foreclosed.
But pray now to the objects in the mirror.
Remember they are closer than they appear.
ALL CHILDREN ARE DEMENTED

What was not possible in that sunny yard
where I watched the furled hibiscus open?
In a patch of wet, black soil, I dug a tunnel
to Mars, which was behind the earth, eclipsed.

I interrogated an elephant-ear plant.

Its flower, pointed, pinkish orange,
looked like a carrot. “Eat me,” it suggested.
I bit, tasting first bitter and then blood,
and spat it back down onto the black soil.

In our eccentric orbits of the yard,
Mars, ascendant, nearly hit the earth.
From five on I did nothing but drink Ripple, smoke Lucky Strikes, and stroke my triple nipple, while sheriffs scoured the slums of old Plantation to bring me in for robbing the Liquor Station. I can’t say why I stole that case of condoms; my woman, twelve years old, already pregnant, no longer cared for sex. Behind drawn curtains, we fought like wild beasts about a certain homeroom teacher (who must here be nameless). I wouldn’t say I was entirely blameless for all the senseless violence that followed—the beatings, all the Valium she swallowed… The hum of the garage door when her parents returned home from a long day running errands to find her face-down at the kitchen table. Perhaps today, had I not then been able to slip away by crawling through the hedges, I’d be out here, crouched on those narrow ledges, instead of in here, in my corner office, balancing my profits on my losses.
FROM AN OFFICE WINDOW

I watch people march into the Loop,  
cars not stopping, as they stream into intersections,  
carrying fruit baskets wrapped in green cellophane,  
parcels in greasy butcher paper, cinder blocks.

A blue tow-truck strikes and throws a man in black sweatpants  
ten feet. In the air, he drops a sack of rice,  
and a small woman hurries to bend and pick it up.  
The pavement is sloppy with bodies.  
She totters across the skid marks under her burden.

A white van fishtails over the sidewalk and through  
the window display of the Architectural Society.  
Docents boil out, clambering over the windshield.

A helicopter alights atop the Monadnock Building.  
A tall man in tan coveralls strides towards it.  
Its rotors pulse nervously as it lifts off.
LIVE FROM THE KITCHEN SINK

Rusted grater; miniature whisk; glazed-eye pot-lid;
minced bits of mushrooms and onion:
these, the unwashed masses of my dishes,
crowd in, refugee-close, and clash if not policed.
The pot assaults the wine-glass, which would bleed
if its blood had not long since caked dry.
Not a Teflon-armored pan has escaped the scars
of cuisine. Not one butcher knife
will willingly come clean.
EATING A GRAPEFRUIT

Before

With thumbnail scalpel
I roll away white,
subcutaneous
fat, red flesh made of
giant, freakish cells.

After

Tongue sugared. Fingers
sticky against rind.
Pith and seed scattered
like clothing removed
in sweet, acid haste.
THE PATRON AT TABLE SIX

Waiter, who knew Beef Wellington wasn’t a fancy, overdone boot? I hear you’ve developed a method to camouflage compound butter.

I’ll pass on the whiskey reduction; I don’t want my eyes deglazed now. I’m on a mission to marzipan.

Waiter, the villain in this story will be the vanilla crème brûlée. I gazed into the black heart of my cup of coffee and there found my own face.
CEVICHE DE PULPO

¡Sí, bien fresco!
the waiter nodded, and served
the platter. Doused with lime and chile, it writhed
in my gut
two days. Then I let it go, which shows

it can’t be held,
swims effortlessly through nets,
jumps its tank and is found menacingly crouched
in closets
clutching brooms and mops, livid, mottled;

black-sun eyes make
planes of spheres, rods into cubes,
glower at specters humans could never see.
Each sucker
is a brain bent to topologies

of escape or
concealment. The octopus
has never been in a tight spot; in a jam
jar it makes
its fortress, knows when to cling and when

to boil over
the brim of its den like mad
spaghetti, when to take its propulsive drink
and vanish.
Could we conceal so much with mere ink?
ALL THE EVIL FISH SURVIVED THE FLOOD

In divers’ nightmares swim Paleozoic monsters,
unpunished in the depths of sin: the cod
who never learned the fear of God;
the wrasse immersed in thoughts of war;
the octopus, with power to take a pleasing color,
in unnatural cohabitation with the spiny lobster;
the dreaded sting-ray and the skate in search of prey.
Those who never stop for prayer: the avid sea bass;
the gluttonous grouper; the keen barracuda;
the boring worm, who dreams only of tunnels;
the basking shark, who sleeps all day;
the prideful puffer fish; the ominous drum.
Wake slowly from dreams of fish:
brought too quickly to the surface
something inside will swell and burst.
AFTER GOMORRAH

We waited for it, The End, most every night; we thought it would break down the door, that there would be fire; but nothing like that happened, so we drained the time, let it swirl down, following our emptied bottles in their dizzying spiral to a sticky floor, until one of us, too sick to play, too sick to fall asleep, would hear a cough on the doorstep and remember.

It was never the one we were waiting for. It was only Tomorrow, shuffling his feet on the mat. Yesterday slipped out when we weren’t looking, and told him everything, persuaded him to his camp, made him swallow the new-day promise he had rehearsed. That was the loophole in all our resolutions: Tomorrow is not another day. It is the same day. As relentlessly as the earth spins east, the room spins west, and we stay right where we are.

Sometimes we fooled ourselves that it was him, The Disaster—that we had welcomed in The Lesson, and been burned, and so were aching to be cooled by Tomorrow; but, perversely, he took his time. When finally he woke us in our beds, we stretched, and with outstretched fingers found our daughters.

When Tomorrow fails to bring the promised end, how do we cross this wasteland of days, we flocks of Zoar, browsing a dead sea’s edge, gleaning what moisture we can from desert weeds, without licking from time to time a certain pillar that stands for our ungovernable needs?
TOMORROW

It threatens to be the fulcrum
of a precarious year,

as predictable as the path
of a bullet in a china shop.

The cumuli of tension
are real, if not corporeal,

and morning drops options:
the cacophony of chaffinches,

the calm of crows,
or the ardent blast of the budgerigar.

Some falls seem preordained,
some plummets inevitable:

at 7:07, a radiant glyph
will be deciphered.

Others are contingent
on friction, or gravity:

in a house near the silver market, emotion
will be expressed as a fluid

whose volume determines
whether the year will tilt

or swing in its coy balance
like the ape in my armoire.
THE HALF-LIFE OF HOME FURNISHING

I am moving into a much smaller place,
deciding what will stay and what will go.  
As the president lies about the impending battle, 
I lie to myself about the more immediate battle 
between wanting to reserve a sacred place 
for a pair of yellow swivel chairs, or let them go.

Already, the coffee mugs are gone,  
except for a white novelty cup 
of fake, ceramic coffee, perched on the shelf.  
She always left her half-drunk coffee on some shelf 
for me to find, after the cream had gone— 
a cataract in the brown eye of the cup.

I can’t see back to the beginning of this tale:  
where the hurt came, why it has to sting,  
but I suppose there is a lesson in this paring down: there is an end to every pairing.  
Can I drop the past as coolly as the gecko drops its tail?  
I am the bee who rips her guts out with her sting.
A LOGIC OF LOVE

**Theorems**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>U ⇒ I</th>
<th>Biconditional Love:</th>
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<tr>
<td>I ⇒ U</td>
<td>If U, then I.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I ↔ U</td>
<td>If I, then U.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ⇔ U</td>
<td>Then, given that I entail, am entailed by, U,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and given further U being true,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>there is proof of love—and I.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Tautological Love:</td>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>U and I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[U ∧ I] ∨ [U ∧ I]</td>
<td>or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U ∧ I</td>
<td>U and I:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>That is no question.</td>
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<tr>
<td>[I ∧ U] ∧ [I ∧ U]</td>
<td>It is likewise folly to think true</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I and U:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Contradictory Love.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I ∧ ~U</td>
<td>But let the proposition, I and not U,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>though difficult to accept, prove true.</td>
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<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Since there can be no universe without U,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~I?</td>
<td>the paradox almost begs me to conclude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>not I—</td>
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<td>though nothing in logic tells us why.</td>
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PANTOUM OF THE SMALL DEPRESSION

The door slams and you wonder if you’ve left your shopping list at home. It doesn’t matter. You make the same decisions every day: Bagged spinach salad, fresh “Parisian” blend.

Your shopping list at home, it doesn’t matter. What was it that you wanted anyway? Bagged spinach salad, fresh “Parisian” blend’s for someone else, not you—a total stranger.

What was it that you wanted anyway? It’s unclear as an old man’s muttering for someone else, not you—a total stranger—of tax entanglements in Mindanao.

It’s unclear as an old man’s muttering: why you read cookbooks in bed and dream of tax entanglements in Mindanao and wake up with an odd scent on your fingers;

why you read cookbooks in bed and dream of mincing garlic, finely dicing onions, and wake up with the odd scent on your fingers that a cutting board holds in myriad small depressions.

Of mincing garlic, finely dicing onions, you are as ignorant as of the reasons why the pillow holds its myriad small depressions morning after morning after morning.

You are as ignorant as of the reasons why you make the same decisions every day. Morning after morning after morning, the door slams and you wonder if you’ve left.
Sitting in my plastic porch chair,
I sprinkle a pinch of soil into an antlion’s lair.

Indignant, the antlion kicks up a spray of sand,
“My feelings exactly,” I tell him. He understands.

Both of us live in traps that seem to catch
none but ourselves: the visitors unlatch

the doors we can’t, though we know they exist.
When did the town that cupped me make a fist?
I have been stationed here at Hog Town while the detachment is out and will be here at least a month until reinforcements—it is a piddling fort, a shored-up trading ditch. Hemmed in by hammock and the Seminole, I am bored to cinders. Would you believe at this age I have take to smoking in the afternoon blaze, and counting the sacks of meal, the powder kegs, when all my life I hated nothing more than figures? It cannot be helped. I am too much indoors, for it is a fair bit hotter here than in Virginia—mornings are the only tolerable times for walking. Between the day heat and nighttime raiding parties of mosquitoes, I make what I call my patrol, trudging the flattest pan of earth I have ever seen, save that it gives way in numerous sinks, some filled in by lakes teeming with monstrous alligators floating like slabs of black bark in a tremendous logjam. I wish I could draw it for you, Little Sister—you would quite forget the frogs you are always catching. When you are older, perhaps you will come down here and see them for yourself. For my part, I would sooner keep away from swamps, and the Indian-haunted woods. One time only, I descended into one of the sinks—the worst of them, the one called the Devil’s Millhopper for the teeth and bones half ground-up on its floor, weathering their long way down through the cracks of hell. My habit is to skirt its southern edge and turn southeast to the fort, stopping, if it is not too late, at the Johnston place for water and some talk—but as I walked there two days back a musket-shot startled me. I confess I panicked, and half-ran, half-fell down the sinkhole’s side and came to rest in a cooler place. Catching my breath against a thick pine, I took in the ferns like the shed feathers of some great, green eagle, or the luridly moldering hands of fallen ghouls. Presently, I could hear a woodpecker knocking away, and then the hushed but insistent murmuring of a waterfall that wound its thin white path into the green and vanished, like the attacker—squirrel? deer?—
I suppose I had imagined. Don’t tell Father this, or Mother about the tobacco. You understand.
LIVE OAK

You’ve walked this trail before, though not with me, and sat with someone else, beneath that tree, telling the old story, something about a bed, and a bottle cap … I didn’t hear a word you said.

Something buried shudders in the leaves and cannot be explained by any breeze. A strange foreboding, though strangely not new: I’ve walked this trail before, though not with you.
THE LADY WITHOUT THE LAKE

She has put on the black taffeta gown
sequined with duckweed, her water-lettuce flowers,
and snailshell pendant on a silver chain of foam.
Already the headlights are glinting
across the rippled fabric of her dress
as, shivering, she anticipates the moment
beneath the dark, dull rhythm of her breath.
“TRULY YOU ARE COME TO DO US GOOD”

*Adapted from James Holman’s Travels in Madeira*

Blind but a year, soon I learned to see
through the eyes of others, and have my recompense:
no longer vulnerable to the deceptions of appearance,
and aware, as few men are, of sight’s commodity.

I think how on Christmas-day we took possession
of the settlement on Fernando Po from its chiefs—
not for gold spent, nor for discharge of our weapons,
but for three bars of their much-beloved iron.

I think how, at feast, they placed a sheep’s womb in my hands—
immediately I dropped it and shook my head,
and, delighted that I had refused this honor,
they ate the womb with its two unborn lambs;

how we offered them of our salt for their plain meat—
they were disgusted, and through gesture made it known
they wished us to throw away our own store;
how they would not let us light our tobacco-pipes;

how in the market, a native maid, impatient
to be recognized, gave her bosom to my hand;
how her father laughed at my embarrassment
when a seeing man would then have seen his death;

how fortune glides like a mermaid to one’s ship,
and, once she’s hauled aboard, throws her arms around
a stunned sailor; how, before he finds his senses,
she is the fading laugh of a splash in Maidstone Bay.
KEALAKEKUA CANTO

When Lono sailed down from the Arctic Ocean,
we were too stuffed with poke and mac salad
to show too much emotion

over the fact that he’d survived the gelid
months of fog and walrus-dotted ice floes
to row up on our beach so thin and pallid,

and in such serious need of summer clothes.
But Lono locked himself up with his charts
and kept his cabin door closed,

too busy practicing the art
of pronouncing humuhumunukunukuapua’a
to drive his threadbare crew to the Kona K-mart.

Lono would rather dive into Kilauea!
They hadn’t sailed thousands of leagues to shop,
but rather to hike two miles over a’a

and stub their toes on black volcanic outcrop
on their way to another unique black-sand beach,
and to listen to Louis Prima singing, hummala buehhu la zeebuhla bop,

on the radio of the borrowed truck now beached,
wheels spinning—mahalo for your kokua?
Fortune spun help out of Lono’s reach.

As it happened, we gorged ourselves on manapua,
laulau, and long rice from our hamper,
cheering the aspirants to pu‘uhonua

as they raced like the mongoose Lono once saw scamper
from the roadside into a field of sugarcane—
mahalo for your venereal distemper.

When we saw his blood incarnadine
the bay, we knew that Lono was cooked there in that shallow
broth of brine. Unhappy Valentine!
In Scythia six months, I received the message
that my mother had drowned my books in the washing machine.
Whatever. It will take more than suds to drown my dreaming
of the concrete canyons of Rome and the stones
of its gloried avenues. Where is your equal here?
Is there no toothpaste in Tomis? All teeth are black on the Black Sea.
I’d like to report the toothless women smile at me.

The currency I’ve brought here isn’t fungible.
The publican bites my coins and hands them back, frowning.
Even the soda machines spit out Caesar’s heads.
And the girls, with their precarious teeth?
My Latin glances off the rims of their ears with a ping!

It’s not all bad news here in the provinces. It makes
for better georgics than when I tilled the sidewalks with my feet,
and there was only you, uncultivable, bursting your trellises.
The force to domesticate you evaded me.
Now you say come to Rome, we’ll drink some wine
and reminisce about old times. (And then, you should add,
you’ll retire with what’s-his-name, Brutius, when I
return here to my rustic relegation. I regret I must decline.)

We both know my penchant for melodramatic conflation
and mixed metaphor, so I’ll provide your retort:
say I am as much the banisher as the banished,
that I never lived in and could not be exiled from Rome,
and that Scythia’s a misnomer for my new home,
a place I’ve come on my own, no edge of the world,
but only a convenient spot to unhitch my plowshare,
unfurrow my brow, and tender my resignation.
ME TRAIN

Snow is falling in sparse, indolent flakes
too weak to stick to the roofs of factories
that slide by in the gray afternoon.
We ease into the station.

The train is suddenly full of—I know them!—people,
smiling at me across the aisle.
And then we are rolling through blocks of condos,
clean, attractive, and, we can agree, soulless.

Now we are in a tunnel, the lights gone out.
Sight comes only in flashes of sparks from the wheels.
The faces of my friends catch fire and melt.

Then another platform, and light. The doors sigh
and exhale their breath of people.

I steal a glance across the aisle
and look away upon seeing my friend’s face
still maimed, like melted and recongealed butter,
reading the same book as he disappears.

Condos and factories give way to hills and shanties,
the tracks end, and the train becomes a bus
trying to rattle me out of its hissing doors.

Snow solidifies into rain, which fades to fog,
and out of the fog the bus reverts to train
and keeps on rolling toward Last Avenue.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jonathan Stern was born and raised in Plantation, Florida. He received a B.A. in English, with a concentration in creative writing, from Northwestern University. Before coming to the University of Florida to pursue his M.F.A. in poetry, he worked as a computer programmer in Chicago. Purported autobiographies notwithstanding, he is not an altogether unpleasant person.