

5-1-2016

Tearing up the Tallgrass

Brett Salsbury

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Salsbury, Brett, "Tearing up the Tallgrass" (2016). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*. 2728.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/9112170>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

TEARING UP THE TALLGRASS

By

Brett Salisbury

Bachelor of Arts – English; History of Art
University of Kansas
2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing

Department of English
College of Liberal Arts
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2016

Thesis Approval

The Graduate College
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 5, 2016

This thesis prepared by

Brett Salisbury

entitled

Tearing Up the Tallgrass

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing
Department of English

Claudia Keelan, M.F.A.
Examination Committee Chair

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D.
Graduate College Interim Dean

Donald Revell, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

P. Jane Hafen, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Pierre Lienard, Ph.D.
Graduate College Faculty Representative

ABSTRACT

This creative thesis project is a culmination of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing degree at UNLV. The thesis—titled *Tearing up the Tallgrass*—was composed entirely during my graduate semesters at UNLV. As a book of poetry, it explores the dynamics of humans in nature, white privilege, objectivity, fact- and myth-making, and artistic practice. Written under the supervision of Claudia Keelan (committee chair) and Donald Revell (committee member), my committee further includes P. Jane Hafen (English) and Pierre Lienard (Anthropology). Their disparate subject and genre interests are meant to diversify the feedback received during this project’s composition. Some of the poems have been published online through independent journals and magazines: “A Home of Our Own” (Words Dance Publishing); “A Cure for Migraines” (Fourculture Magazine); “A Riparian Zone” (Foothill); and “Museum Label #6”, “Museum Label #8”, and “Museum Label #18” (Guide to Kulchur Creative). The project comprises 68 pages.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thesis Approval Page ii
 Abstract..... iii
 Table of Contentsiv

1.

INSTINCT..... 3
 Museum Label #1 4
 Museum Label 5
 VARIATION UNDER NATURE 6
 LAWS OF VARIATION 7
 ON THE GEOLOGICAL SUCCESSION OF ORGANIC BEINGS 8
 GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION 9
 Bison bison bison..... 10
 Bos taurus 11
 Helianthus 12
 Triticum aestivum 13
 Odocoileus virginianus 14
 Label #3 15
 Museum Label #4 16
 Museum Label #5 17
 Museum Label #6 18
 Museum Label 19
 20
I ride a bike for the first time as I told myself / 21

2.

A Frame for the Needlepoint..... 25
 A Riparian Zone 26
 Magicicada septendecem..... 27
 Terrapene ornata ornata 28
 STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE 29
 ON THE IMPERFECTION OF THE GEOLOGICAL RECORD 30
 MUTUAL AFFINITIES OF ORGANIC BEINGS: MORPHOLOGY—EMBRYOLOGY—
 RUDIMENTARY ORGANS 31
Each word is on purpose. When the trellis was installed the couch's / 32
 33
 #12 34
 Museum Label #14 35
 HYBRIDISM..... 36
 A Home of Our Own..... 37
 A Reservoir Host..... 38
Take care with the grocery list—I hear that someone wrote / 39

3.

| | |
|---|----|
| Scirius carolinensis | 43 |
| Apis mellifera | 44 |
| Cynomys ludovicianus..... | 45 |
| Sphecius speciosus | 46 |
| Sturnella neglecta..... | 47 |
| Homo sapiens | 48 |
| NATURAL SELECTION; OR THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST | 49 |
| DIFFICULTIES OF THE THEORY | 50 |
| MISCELLANEOUS OBJECTIONS TO THE THEORY OF NATURAL SELECTION..... | 51 |
| | 52 |
| Museum Label #16..... | 53 |
| Muse | 54 |
| 18..... | 55 |
| <i>Our playlists have synced. Here's another collection of couplets. My bedroom /</i> | 56 |

4.

| | |
|--|----|
| Museum Label #19 | 60 |
| Taraxacum | 61 |
| GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION— <i>continued</i> | 62 |
| <i>The spaghetti cooks. At high noon, we leave /</i> | 63 |
| VARIATION UNDER DOMESTICATION..... | 64 |
| Label | 66 |
| RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSION | 67 |
| Museum Label #21 | 68 |
| Curriculum Vitae | 70 |

1.

INSTINCT

There's something wrong here. I'm privileged. I don't remember the lessons I was taught and now I try to unlearn them. I can't remember. Never drink water straight from the tap.

It hurts when you are unkind. My gut tells me things. By listening to one's chakra we lay our ears to the ground, and to the ether most white people cannot access. Pay heed, to dear ley lines: we are all closer than we realize.

Instinct must not be confused with what is social.

Chatter at birds.

Call up the goose bumps and arm-hair.

Let the machine sense its phase in the drying cycle.

Say "ow" before actually getting hurt.

Stare into his eyes and feel warm.

Stare into his eyes and be deceived.

Museum Label #1

This is a description of the object right behind you. I will list the materials in just a few moments—as soon as I create the artwork. My mother taught me to value wisdom. She told me to listen and to swim with the dolphins—and that this should be done while holding a paring knife.

This work was composed with the following media: hail; sheep-skin; a cheese grater; and the loveliest bouquet of daffodils and wheatstalks.

Museum Label

With this work, I felt I could cut
a little deeper. I planned it in
advance, breaking car windows
with my old trunk of toy cars.
The shattered glass is a metaphor
for metaphors: a literal collection
of all of your reflections.

*This work was composed of the
following media: glass; tree syrup;
gesso; shredded lettuce; a fork,
and then a spoon; a microburst;
and green sky.*

VARIATION UNDER NATURE

There seems to be a recipe for science. Progression is both chaotic and wild. We simplify far too much, and there are levels to the rainscape of a cloud forest. We are unrelaxed if we are not present. Remember that there's no native humans here and politics seem to never work out—but we try.

On the road the humidity clings to my forearms. I use commas too much, and check my phone though it has no connection. The less I know the more I am desperate.

Taxis arrange nicely into stanzas. It is all glorious and strange, and so I write obsessively. But I barely involve in conversation—and I underline the definition of my *self*. Arriving any place is both mistake and education.

Nothing is really understood, I find. If I had a museum there would be no labels or I would burn it all up. I can't really plan and I dearly understand this. We'll make a left at the next fork.

LAWS OF VARIATION

We're all terrorists. We look at the moon and claim ownership of the tides. We snorkel and disturb and destroy what we see. We kill other people; our system does it more. The tiniest noise made us lock our doors. Now we dwell in interesting evenings—
and I've developed such allergies! They created themselves while we all took advantage. In Western medicine, I can't seem to find an answer.

So we snuff. Our everyday drag is murder. No one knows the answer because no one's asked the question. We don't need water for the future: we need power and the right pancake syrup.

ON THE GEOLOGICAL SUCCESSION OF ORGANIC
BEINGS

You are a murderer. It's beheld inside the walls of your cells and encased in the molecules of your DNA. Your bones remember. Your hair remembers. That skin and hair standing on end tells you that you're in trouble. Our bodies remember better than any book.

We don't remember stories because we are told none of value. We don't ask our elders because they never did either. The house crumbles and rests in rain. I forget who in my history built the mill. Everything is set up against what's good.

But please: know that we fail as we are born. One day this will be a ghost town and a testament to our decisions. There is no river here. The woman who runs the post office will attend your funeral.

On another day the grocery store will close and the bench dedicated to my Grandma will sit and rust and settle. And on the tiniest level, pilfering the dead's belongings feels like thievery.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

I want to return the Monet to France and the thousands-year-old water vessel to where we found it. When you bought your pitcher from Wal-Mart you never expected it to last millennia. Traces of lemonade are written in the lines and you know you shouldn't have drunk the expired leftovers. The label writers will never know just how often you made fruit punch. Much of the cold press coffee was sourced from Ethiopia, you swear. It's some deep-sea strip tease.

We are trade. Kitchen utensils are used to capture partners and have children. We know our DNA is stronger; we know our lineage will last longer than yours. It's no wonder the rich are as selfish as they are—

Bison bison bison
or, American bison

We bring everything to extinction. The pan
of baked mac and cheese is thrown away;
leftover hot dogs remain half-eaten. My sister
eats them cold. She pulls wheat
from the ground as she wears a shirt designed
with an intricate, patterned shield. It begins
to thunder and lightning, and she covers
a spot in the tallgrass with a hat.

I hear the acid rain.
Meadowlarks can hear it all too.

We keep the garbage in the basement.
The corners here seem dirty, but only
when my mother sees them. We roam
the hills in all seasons, stealing corn in the late
Autumn, wondering when the homestead
will fall, knowing how much is threatened.

Bos taurus
or, Cattle

I don't like the way I use you.
I should write an elegy for you.
I tire of the sun beating down
upon your back. All you are
is consumed. I suppose I'm a
super-predator.

There's 80 acres, you know—
I wonder why I stay in this
meek room. At every tree
corner I find a living thing.
They're there anyway, and they
always have been. I stop short
of admitting fault, but
it makes me sad to clean
my own messes.

This isn't an equation. In the
end, everything is edible. And
I'm insatiably hungry again.
Allow me to sever the cord.

Time has left me with remains
of a translucent eye-cover. It's
almost as pointless as wisdom
teeth.

Helianthus
or, Sunflower

There's a craving
for new place. I can feel it
when my folks yell
at the water bed. Stepping outside
is an exercise in breathing.
We always forget the seeds.

In the short term, we don't
think of the long term.
We stash gas drums around
every shed corner. Our care
waned in the pasture patty
breeze. It's telltale. We've
never really explained how
we feel. We have the privilege
not to need to. I doubt we'll even
finish the repainting. The cans
go in the basement, away
from what we are, though
that is our foundation. We hide
from twisters there. Don't be coy.
You might be swept away,
but we'll claim you as ours.

Triticum aestivum
or, Common wheat

I forget who I tell what. There's so much
of you. Barely a week ago there was felt
on the Cottonwood—a depression
in the fungal infection rampant
on the humid patio. We realize
our whiteness; we eat everything.

I'm shy about you. We've grown together.
In harvest I'll cut you and dismember
the endosperm. We have to eat too.
The tastiest is the bran and germ.

In a wicked way there's barely a thing to do
here. My bones recall the lynch. I wonder
who in my blood is responsible.

Odocoileus virginianus
or, White-tailed deer

We only comment on the white people—
the only ones we notice.

They speak in couplets, pre-
organized, a burden,

which I am allowed as no one really
looks after me. But this helps explain

the plurality of guns in every closet, of all
attires and all lengths, a collection perfect

for the sand piles in our pasture. Anyone
wandering in is first examined via pinhole,

everyone's finger wedged across the field
plain. All of a sudden we have something

to write about. I tap into the consciousness
of a grasshopper's nirvana. Luckily, my bones

seem to remember the chill,
the lack of awareness of a path

toward an end, a whimpering horn fading
into the harbor of a lake dock. In truth

we don't remember anything—we haven't
really learned a thing at the hands of our

genocide. It's simply a matter
of changing the history books.

Label #3

I was inspired here by the stars in the sky. I masturbated everywhere and let it become dick cheese, remembering clearly that museums are where culture returns to die. This work used to exist in the stacks of the library, hidden in the middle where no one else visits. It will next be shown to a room full of nuns; they will tear off their habits and strip at *The Ruby*.

This work was composed with the following media: madness; wildness; horse hooves; small intestines; VHS tapes; the first two labels; blood quantum regulations; a one-room schoolhouse; and that long trail of dick cheese that could probably reach the moon.

Museum Label #4

I completed this piece the day
I quit veganism. I also quit insomnia
and my habit of clipping arm hair
with a pair of garden shears.

This work is composed of a lot

Museum Label #5

In this work I recorded my voice every day for six months. I hated it and I wanted it to take me out to dinner to apologize. I began to understand how uneasy it is to paint: how much it slips away with all the moist oil in its grasp. I continued painting further—when I ripped out the canvas and spliced it onto a slated piece of sandstone. This process continued with even more acts, but that wouldn't leave you hanging if I told you everything.

This work was comprised of the following materials (but who knows anymore): stiletto heels; Tornado Alley; Bobble-head dolls; pencil; expired type-AB+ blood; celebrity-chewed table scraps; brightness; what you lost; magnetic tape; magnetism; whiteness again (like always); acupuncture needles; and cloth enough for a mummy.

Museum Label #6

I move in and out of this work, trading spots with those more fortunate and purchasing my sociocultural pardons. I received admission,

—the exact pigment found in *Lady Ferns*. I also noticed weathervanes shaking in the presence of pure hail. And so I created this, standing on one leg.

This work is comprised of Carbon-Dioxide.

Museum Label

I can draw with a stubby charcoal pencil

I can draw with this and
it will teach me its tricks .

*This work was composed
of the following materials:
patience; fortitude; oats;
discount polyester; layered
time; oneness; errands;
a fishery; well water; soybeans;
a stubby stem of charcoal.*

(& everything else)

for A.A.

This work could be worn by a mannequin or hanger—by woodplank tiles resting in the yard, or by the hummingbird drinking dirty nectar. It's best expressed by vivacious makeup: metallic bits with dabs from a hairy brush. I wouldn't place it on a runway—I would cover it with magnetic tape and buy it its own airplane seat. It's a person, you'll see, in some shape or form. It won't even submit .

*This work is comprised of the following
media: bird feathers; self-help books;
; a horizon line; drapery;
plastic canvas; holes; vision; sight; color;
line; ; personality.*

*I ride a bike for the first time as I told myself
I could do it. The concrete waves remind me of*

*gypsum—something that burns my knees when I
fall. Everything falls from the sky, and when I'm not*

*looking, my bread turns stale and I run out of
insect repellent out in a jungle of sorts, the cupboards*

*falling in the slightest wind. Demolition has made
some progress—I can almost foresee all of the dinner*

*parties, and the way spiders make webs in the walls.
I reach the point when weekends cease, and all of*

*the work is for all my future children. Still, my skin
peels. Asking for a sunset, leaves roar with indecision.*

*Nothing can make up its mind, especially in a forest of
road junctions made of partitions. I choose the left*

*and place a crib, forgetting I still have so many years.
Imagine for a moment the delicious, tart, sour taste of*

*guanábana—and lose momentum as the guest list is built.
There are no directions and the tea is frozen. My*

*gender fails and the water stops running. Here I am—
a big 'ol house on a hill, right on top of the torn tallgrass.*

2.

My wife asked me:
can we move into their home? I've shed
all my tortoise-shell fur. The veranda
is made of exquisite brick. There's a large rock
they discovered while building the basement.
Half of my blood is unprovable too. Nothing
worries me now. Let's have grilled cheese.

Where should I place my mother's needlepoint?
All of my poems are really about needlepoint.

I told her, *she said*.
I told her about the landslide. And then we
built a house there. We're so much smarter
now. My sandals have lasted for two whole
years. We still haven't figured out what to put
on your great-great-great-grandfather's grave.
Can I make you a grilled cheese?

My uncle blew there in the
strictest wind, by the wildest

steel that glistens in its menace. The
seams rip in the in-between, and sand

on the sidewalk is momentarily
superior. In the driest cracks

of every pore the dirt nestles and blocks
his blood, and yet it drips

in spite of mammatus. The smoke
mingles in its own greyness and joins

the drum of this broken watershed
and wonderland. The ecosystem

flounders, and the plastic bags
float in the sourest patch, snagging

their film on the beckoning
cacti needles. He was further surprised

by three pieces of pepper spray, colored
a vibrant ruby. This list concluded

with a Maneki-neko, its arm severed
by an In-N-Out wrapper smothered

in ketchup. He told me a story
about all the water he misses,

about all the crevasses which
he is reluctant to relinquish.

Magiccicada septendecim
or, Pharaoh cicada

What happens next vibrates with synth beats and another 17 years, along with death and renewal; no Spring, but the edge of the world: a cliff. There you see the layers of Pre-Cambrian life, and more lessons to bring to each cocktail mixer, excavations of a text nearly unreadable, an earthquake to all of our eager foundations.

We burrow there, thanks to the dirt. To protect the nest we swallow multivitamins, breathing with a bit more intent, scaling the nearest terrace to film the tornado damage.

And in the end of your exile, amidst a clever ruse, a transplanted ladyfinger sprouts by your garden, and begins to sing. What comes next.

Terrapene ornata ornata
or, Ornate box turtle

I never see you around here. When I came home from from
the year before last, everyone woke to the sound of my foot-
prints. The creak in the boards was never fixed, my closet
the only soundless place, the raspberries devoured
from the fridge like my nightmares.

In fact, I've never seen you in the wild before. The abstract
landing caressing the backyard is filled with pieces of what
could be your shell. I'm sorry for the mess. There are 20
dollars in this roll of bank quarters. What else do we need?

Right now we only have croutons for the salad.
In a few million years perhaps we'll have mountains.

STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE

Some roads have dead ends and others merely end in ocean. Exiting enables your practice of walking and the theft of every walked-on piece of sand. You meditate with the marine iguanas and fail. Two planes per day discover the island. You're broken and you burn your skin.

As a weak animal you should not mate. You struggle to determine the path to take next and then there's nothing to be but silence.

The next moment finds a handful of magma. You reunite for the first time in millennia. It feels right as long as you feel. I could indulge but the drive-thru asks for my order.

ON THE IMPERFECTION OF THE GEOLOGICAL RECORD

I've told you about how I can't remember everything. I can't remember how all of this started; in what order the Grand Canyon descended. I'm not sure which finches made their way here first but I guarantee they all survived here together. They made their nest in the rock-face and the weaker ones fell. As I approached the edge I feared my phone would perish as I used it as a camera.

Those that record seem to live longer now. My friend had a longer nose than I did but they died when their nostril was clogged. When I left the country just five years ago I made my memories by writing them down. Most of the sentences signify nothing I can recall.

What I do remember is Monkey the cat. She hid in the corners of the common area. As the rain fell she found a mouse and severed it. Her tail swayed.

Only in an unrelated moment will you really remember.

MUTUAL AFFINITIES OF ORGANIC BEINGS:
MORPHOLOGY—EMBRYOLOGY—RUDIMENTARY
ORGANS

“When the first humans walked on two legs” is the narrative we privilege. We forget about those that didn’t.

We forget about their mother. Her organs. Her affections. The way she coddled her child and watched as they walked. She didn’t have a gender either.

My mother turned this home into death and I recognize that I could have made a difference. She’s death too. We’re both death. It’s written in our bodies, in each embryo, in each word we speak, in each movement we make, in each manner we trap.

Have you asked yourself where you’re going?

Each word is on purpose. When the trellis was installed the couch's leg was held up by the Bible and Webster's English dictionary. On a

trip to the police department hair stood on its end; it's sheared using the cleanest of garden shears. Overpaying for a diving trip,

turtles become extinct and all the reasoning fades. The bulb burns out and none of your stanzas make sense. This poem, of course, is impossible,

and the coffee is all soggy and burnt. Wait a moment while your instinct subsides. Your parent awaits to teach a few lessons. They were taught

wrong, and so were theirs—and so were theirs, and so were theirs.

#12

I encountered a crisis. Time is layered; I live in a watershed;
and I forgot that my bedroom only had hardwood floor.

When
asked by a reporter what I mean to do
with my accomplishments,
I wanted to try life in drag.

*I made this work with Pine Sol;
phone cords; smartphone apps;
sexy blankets; urgency; pressure;
incandescent light-bulbs; dander;
other toiletries that make you
sneeze; germs, and bacteria;
funnel clouds; Oregon Trail ruts.*

Museum Label #14

My house fell down
like a collection of
unbalanced sinus
cavities. I could
barely breathe. My
daughter improved
her SAT score, only
to begin hooking. We
hired a Girl Scout
troop to fix the
broken stovetop. I
made this piece, in-
between blowjobs.

*This work is comprised
of the lines separating
the cocaine piles.*

HYBRIDISM

Your idea of your life is wrong.
Your idea of your life is wrong.
Your idea of your life is wrong.
Your idea of your life is wrong.
You are racist and sexist and ableist.
(repeat)

You should make some more art.
(repeat)

Corpses lined the sunset:
Here's the place, *she said*,
never mind the midden.
Past the fence we'll leave our messes
and on the porch I won't remember things.

In this stanza
we will sleep,
she said.

In this one
we will rest.

And by lowering the den and bending up the trellis
we will raise this house's logic: we can nestle it up

to the canopy and build a few more desks,
raze the untimely vine and varnish all the stucco,

eat a dinner of turnips and light just a few fireworks,
procreate a foosball team and pad the beach with mortar,

enact some major laws and steal some loaves of bread.
I struggled. I asked: what do we do now? She scoffed

while she dragged a corpse through the living room.
She told me a story about her needlepoint.

We stock the cupboards with canned beans, the dining table's leaf leaned under the sink. Nothing is unusual: spillover occurs, a botulism warning sprawled all over the ceiling. It's easier to store things in the basement, to never invite the neighbors for drinks.

The hallways are tender, resenting the larger rooms. The roommates hide, leaving their stories to legend. No one fills out the registry, and my makeup case is quietly stolen.

On the porch, a lean-to develops to keep the mailman company. We can't seem to hold the same visitors, as everything merely falls underground. Not even the satellite dish seems to work.

*Take care with the grocery list—I hear that someone wrote
“a dollop of ringworm.” But that’s another thought, the
infestation—a way this place is ruined by how we dodge
responsibility. Running down the hill, we cannot catch the
Brittany pup. It’s a crime when we dust our fingerprints
away, forgetting the angle of the photo frame we just removed.
On the subject of cleaning, where is all their imagination? The
Silver argiope spans trails with its webs, awaiting a touristic
branch to destroy it. Someone may phone pest control;
I merely fall asleep out of respect, and laze. You aren’t likely to
find the saddleback tortoise, because you continue to spy in the
trees for the sight of a frigatebird. Your camera is your lens, and
it is contained in a frame. At home, the spoons are dirty, and we
give ourselves credit for bending the clock’s ticks. Before
we know it, there’s a volcano, ready to startle our hot springs.
At raves, there is no shortage of sugar—something to calm the
nerves and something to remember our past lives. Eating plantains
has a similar effect, in the way we wage battles and egg the sides of
buildings. A solitary ant dodges my pen—and a simple phone call
causes you to forget the boiling chamomile water. The guayaba grows
and we cut it all down in protest. Only humans can do this. No one
communicates in the same language as you, you swear. The only act left
is to buckle your seatbelt—to make peace with passing time. With care
we crash our car in oncoming traffic, ignoring the median, eating empanadas.
There’s a rest area just up ahead. With a totaled car, we can finally see
the sunset, and the way that farmers burn the prairie.
There’s hope yet. Remind me to tell you about the lives I’ve ruined—
about every single sandwich and poem I’ve made—and about every single
stanza I’ve lengthened unfairly.*

3.

Sciurus carolinensis
or, Black squirrel

The world feels heavier this morning—we have another roommate: your acorn. You've traded privacy for a chance to live, and die too soon. And there's smoke in the air vents. I'll fall in love with you every day.

We have the privilege of rocking the system: the triage of the walls. My father designed them in such an odd way. My door is always open.

What I mean is that I write every word on purpose. This isn't a closed system; it's a symphony. Your quaa is so nuanced, like the wind in its caress of the baseboard in the hallway. You belong here just as much as I do.

I twitch every time the front door opens—I wonder if we'll cross paths, and I know as well that everyone else and what I've been told will never allow it.

Apis mellifera

or, Western honey bee

I'm really smart. That's how civilization works: you buy a desk, and it's flimsy. We're carried along by certified professionals who've had so much official training. You could learn so much from them. We should put it on the calendar.

Your wall has no space—I wonder how you remember things. Usually the front yard needs water, while the back has been designed to be avoided. You can make your home wherever you wish, but be aware of screams you'll hear. They're built right into the system.

Cynomys ludovicianus

or, Black-tailed prairie dog

We have habits like yours. We wear them so obviously, poking our heads out of the ground. This is more about us than you, I realize. We are both part of a larger body that breathes vibrantly, and coughs.

We are thankful for lightning. On top of your burrow, we built our outhouse. This afternoon there's a Tornado Watch, and everything turns a muted green. The air circles warm and cold. Only a few of us are willing to admit you to our shelter. You will live longer than us still.

In the geological record, we've gone so far as to classify you. My mother can't remember her grandmother all that well.

Sphecius speciosus
or, Digger wasp

And we are a stung few, as minor
as the sprinkle of corn starch in a
stir fry, as bland as nectar boiled
with a pinch of sugar for the
hummingbirds. Animals fly in order
to live, you know—to thrive.

A tallgrass blade wilts in front of our
home, the proper beginning to
the rest of the day. She plays it
wilder than the stems of a
dandelion, dotting the hills with
the softest kiss. There's one on
your shoulder, too.

But the kiss of a wasp is heartfelt:
they breathe. I think they even
collect like greens and oranges.
This is why our sprays seek solely
to destroy; this is why they will
always dwell in our corners and
above our sinks.

And who lives more creatively.
Who lives better than we do.
Who lives and stings more
fruitfully. We could be deemed
just a speckle of starch—just a
portion of you.

Sturnella neglecta

or, Western meadowlark

We scat near the windows
to gather rhythm, and to dream
a little, remembering there's a
few other worlds out there,
carrying the joy of a family
to more than just a porch
of succulents and deadening,
deepening grass. Every day
we don't have the landscapers
an extra blade of grass swears
revenge.

Now, you see—our nest is made
of such wisdom. I regret that the
Cottonwood Oak is suffering
in quality. There's even dust on your
shoelaces. Our desert continues
with practically endless shade. Next:
perhaps another Dust Bowl, or
the first one all over again, or some
climactic event that occurred before
we arrived to chop down all your
branches.

Homo sapiens
or, The wise man

It's not about the animals
anymore.

NATURAL SELECTION; OR THE SURVIVAL OF THE
FITTEST

Folks with glasses should go extinct. Our strengths have been subverted; potato chips are still tasty. We are angry when the microwave plate is un-aligned. Nutrition labels are a Godsend for I swear they keep us alive.

I need a bestiary to survive. What is that species of shrub? My set of encyclopedias has become no help despite my assurance of their place in the trunk. We're still in the car, merely existing. I cut my hair.

We need to play with the skin we shed. Our goosebumps haven't left our evolution. Neither has our trypophobia with all those holes. You are abject and I am not. I've discovered a few more ways to look at a blackbird.

I will not talk about sex, because that's not what this is about. This is about deciding if you should respond to that text message.

DIFFICULTIES OF THE THEORY

People are dumb.

I have trouble envisioning the walk to my car. I don't remember anything either, and I think in terms of these static dates on a calendar.

I wish we'd include music.

This is all only a draft. We're so obsessed with health that we kill ourselves slowly.

We're full of smoke and we blow it sincerely.

We'll head to the theater to forget our smoking. We never write the scenes that truly matter. There's a train of updates we must install for the cell phone. I need to prioritize how I'll respond to your message.

The whole thing smells of prescription.

MISCELLANEOUS OBJECTIONS TO THE THEORY OF
NATURAL SELECTION

On vacation we buy fresh shrimp farm-raised straight from Vietnam. We need a beach meal to celebrate our travels. Sharks are hungry and chew on the internet. I don't mean to be ungrateful but I don't know who came before me. We burn a few of our fingers and respond well to all of the pain. One day we may learn how to thread a mere needle.

Humans.

Sheets are on sale when we don't even realize. We buy them though we're thousands of miles from home. If we run out of room, we will buy a new vehicle.

The warmest feeling when I think of my cat is how she hates every closed door. But one day, I know, she'll choose to open the front, and make her way to what she now needs. It's never been me.

Great Plains.

Museum Label #16

I have been hard at work, proving my worth. You can clearly see the progress I've made: this room is full of intrepid work. ~~I can barely contain the attention I'm seeking, or the brim-~~
-I may even create my own script to match,
or at the very least, my own colorful ~~and evocative~~ language. Can't you see it ? Can't you sense my ennui? Can't you believe how much I need to get laid?

This work came into its own existence, and I don't need to tell you its materials. They obviously speak for themselves.

Muse

My therapist told me to accept my conditions, and
all of the things causing anxiety, if I am ever to move
forward . I sat in her chair, wiping my nose
. A statue of The Great Gonzo
stared at me from the apse . The Shirelles played
as my throat grew scratchy. I asked
for another cup of horchata. She asked me for an assessment
of my feelings, and I told her I needed to work them out
creatively. She got out a hula hoop.

*I constructed this work with explanations;
sass; storytime; a broken mirror; a neti
pot; hope, and some paper towels;
the last tornado shelter remaining.*

I discovered talent for playing
the harp. I asked my doctor for high-
altitude medication, because I knew
my tour would take me to strange
 heights. I pictured myself sun-
bathing like a cat, pretending to be a
non-factor, asking as if I knew how to
both sing and meow. My travels took
me to archipelagos and volcanos—
Edens and Hells. I took some souvenirs,
and with them, I translated this narrative

*I made this work with postcards; red ink; map shards;
adventure; other tongues; error; tortoise-shell fur;
fortuity; emotion, and dirt; the cellar; the prairie.*

Our playlists have synced. Here's another collection of couplets. My bedroom is finished, but I'm still waiting on the results of the darkroom. How many lines

have you written? I've filled up so many pages with myth and pathos. I hope this diary helps you believe me, and provides an alternate account for my

demise. Never believe what they tell you. Write, and understand how they lie and give birth to you. The coffee is finally cold enough to drink. Personally

I wonder how the sun remembers to set every day. Isn't it ever distracted by the moon, and rain showers? Who else remembers? Bread, spoons, carburetors,

tree frogs? I've filled a whole book—I wonder if it remembers too. I've asked my white body what it thinks, because that's what everyone else seems to do.

I am lucky to have the privilege to think—to watch silently as the cupboard falls to the ground. In the meantime, the coffee is still too hot to drink. The

porch creaks to the slightest creep and wind. The foundation isn't set yet. We cut pineapple for the morning juice. Each word and pillow comes from the mouth

and in some cases hurts as well. There is little more serious than an oncoming storm, especially one that swirls the humidity. If I keep doing what I've been doing

I will wreck. I will always fail so long as I write. Stronger than the stem are waves in the wheat. Forgetting the burn the prairie falls

even flatter. Our home is built in the shade of it all.

4.

Museum Label #19

The artist died, leaving the rest of their descriptions to be written by a ghost writer. We couldn't really fathom this piece, so we decided just to list materials. They are, to the best of our knowledge, quickly falling apart.

This work seems to be made of corn syrup; earwax; black beans; fixative; dental floss; lace-front wigs; enlarged papillae; pine cones; bird seed; reruns of Good Times; breast implants; botched surgery; loose slots; tornados; your britches; covers of an old book titled "The Gods Hate Kansas"; and cheese we think is Gorgonzola, though there is some debate in the office.

Taraxacum
or, Dandelion

There's so many of us. I've started taping you to all of the wallpaper. My siblings told me it is ugly, but at least you have personality. I've made a breakthrough by cleaning the faucet with bleach and vinegar.

I've started baking as well. I feel you watching me every day, helping me get to the heart of the matter. The longer I stay here, the more my heartbeat falls in rhythm with the air conditioning. We both work so hard, and remain so focused.

I've resumed my habit of spackling. I need to borrow a power drill. My parents believe in creativity so I have free reign in a few of the rooms. I multiply. There are long days in which I think too hard, and shorter ones when I become the shadows of the basement and closet.

You will be here after I'm gone.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION—*continued*

Women hold 22% of Parliamentary seats in the world.
21 transgender women were murdered in the US last year—and that number doesn't include those unreported.
Hispanic women earn \$0.54 to the \$1.00 of the white man.
The American Indian population once reached over 12 million, and that's according to white people math. We've managed to reduce that to 237,000 and counting.
You are a race. Look at your skin. Feel it. It has determined your access to success.
There are more black men in prison than are enrolled in college.
The white man is offered a plea deal. The black man is offered an injection.
I am a white man.
If I were to ask you to write out the definitions of race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, and heritage—would you know what to write?
Language is rigged against all but the white man.
15% of the world's population has a disability.
I am a white man taught white people math.
A majority of sexual assault cases are unreported.
I shouldn't need statistics to make this all real but I was educated by the whitest of man.
I know you hear me. Now listen to someone else.

*The spaghetti cooks. At high noon, we leave
on the longest day of the year for our trek.*

*Near the bottom of the hill we find a collection
of spores—each of them hoping to be left to*

*their own wildness. It isn't long before we pull
them away, dirtying the bathroom with sprigs*

*of nature. Even sadder, the plains are pickled
with sun-dried skin. Any pieces alive are buried*

*unmarked. The trek continues with bug-bitten
ankles. We are taught to think before we speak.*

*In a city full of distraction and smog, there is little
room for the patience required. Do you really*

*think what you've accomplished is worthwhile?
Stop for a moment and check the clothes that you*

*wear. Someone somewhere has determined your
worth—the story was written before you began.*

*My grandmother's silverware is rusty in key parts.
It stayed in this land for so many years, outliving*

*even some of the sunflower fields. The funny part
is, none of the utensils were made all that well.*

*Ready yourself for the vintage estate sale. If you
will, trade me for someone better for your dreams.*

*Just never tell me what you've done to me, or when
it is you plan to leave. Airplanes never thought to*

*ask about leaving. Eventually you will reach the runway
and catch a flight to the farthest watershed. There, the*

*fruits are free. In mathematical equations, we realize
the geometry's all wrong. The variables are the oddest*

*letter. It becomes harder to turn the page. Water
boils at a new temperature, and I chew the ends of*

*all my glasses. I leave early in the morning. I sew a
patch on the breast of my jacket, as if it is a name tag.*

*I wonder what my names are. The sketch of this
tattoo is a version of the real thing, en plain aire.*

*There are sounder arguments to make with the facts.
In ignorance of alternative accounts, it's easier then*

*to draw a conclusion. There isn't much else to do,
they claim. The ashes of the cigarette reach the ozone,*

*ruining the plans I've made for supper. Nothing works
anymore, and neither does "she said." We alter our*

*mind's patterns to fit the day's needs. In a single week
we deliver so many packages, and set fire to so many*

*mistakes. In the foyer, the umbrella case is soaking
in vinegar; in the garden, the daisies are plotting*

*their escape from this stanza—this world. Use the machete
to create new hallways. As a professional, there's little*

*to tell to the missing pieces. I will certainly miss this kitchen.
Only a half-hour remains in our quest for solitude*

*and happiness. By changing the pace,
we continue to work. And what*

*else should we worry about
here? There's beetroot stuck*

*in the crevices of my fingernails,
evidence of every meal we made*

*in error. We missed a few months
and now we pay the price. Above*

*all, this is a lifestyle, and so then
is living. The backyard resembles*

*a bag of trash—at least that was the
goal when we began this place. We*

*wonder, of course, if all is made
of tumors. Have you ever built a home*

*of table scraps and memories?
Neither have we.*

VARIATION UNDER DOMESTICATION

As ice melts artifacts uncover. We pave roads according to the Western compass. Everything is already determined. Pouring concrete is thus the easiest act, simplifying all we've forgotten or maimed.

In truth, we domesticated so long ago, and now all we do is interview each other. Nothing is false, but normally winded: so many of our goals are to be faces on film who sleep with humidifiers and complain about the temperature.

But what's best is unspoken: the circular moments as shrub dance by, the Dust Devils prancing in the midst of your horizon line, forests of buildings nestled into mountainsides, and running out of gas once more. It's pleasant. We will succeed until we don't.

Label

The artist left us many articles of clothing. Some of them were breasted with gold plates, while others were torn to shreds and likely worn as skorts.

The biggest accomplishments they've left us are their knack for rearranging furniture; their wisdom to only drink coffee with paint thinners; their adventurous spirit, that claimed many lives; and the memory of their tongue flaps.

*We don't have any guesses
at the materials here, so
instead, we merely baa.*

RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSION

One tells another who tells five more. Myth travels at a different speed. You find it in line at the 7/11 as you pay for your morning coffee. It's gossip and fact, how your dreams rearrange the day.

If you believe in how you water *Sempervivum* you believe in the blood that leys in the ground. We all share it. To remember gossip is to remember the flexibility of giving.

If only we'd trash the versions of our textbooks and revert again to all of our myths. Story is the reason our Gods become kind. The woods out back are a lesson in living. A bee-sting is a rumor that we're doing it all wrong.

Eventually gravity takes its whole toll and then we're returned to the moment we're conceived. It changed me. This poem wouldn't be here if they'd stayed at work an extra hour.

—and to create a bench we need all the materials: wood; saw; measurements; hope; and a myth that sitting adds an extra bit of comfort and how it gives us more time.

In your previous murder you hummed a song in your head. The song you sang was stolen—shared with you, but taken with their lives. You read that talking was the cure for hate—that exchanging with others would fix the broken system. But the fire brews and your marshmallows burn. You are still using the same old tongue.

I made a whole book and I should have stopped talking. I should have unlearned all the tools I used to write it.

Museum Label #21

It's been 20 years. Amazingly, their child found—or perhaps fabricated—a new description, of an artwork probably never created. We're not sure what that all means, but here's the full text, unabridged (and thankfully, no one creates art with materials anymore):

*I want to move to Uzbekistan.
Please chill my sunflowers in the freezer for 10 minutes.
My balls are made of Sterling silver.*

Please stop helping me.

CURRICULUM VITAE

702.767.4302
salsbury.brett@gmail.com
1497 Hialeah Drive #B
Las Vegas, Nevada 89119

Education

- 2016: Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing. University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
- 2012: Bachelor of Arts, English & History of Art. University of Kansas.

Awards & Accomplishments

- 2017: Nominee, Pushcart Prize XLI.
- 2015-16: Vernon D. & Hazel M. Noel Scholarship; Ralph & Elsie Lauer-Potter Scholarship; Ernest & Anne Anderson Scholarship, *Irish Foundation For Educational Excellence*, Chapman, KS.
- 2015-16: Patricia Sastaunik Scholarship, *UNLV Graduate College*, UNLV.
- 2015-16: James F. Adams/GPSA Scholarship, *UNLV Graduate College*, UNLV.
- 2014-15: Ernest & Anne Anderson Scholarship, *Irish Foundation For Educational Excellence*, Chapman, KS.
- 2013: Jack Kent Cooke Graduate Arts Award Finalist, *Jack Kent Cooke Foundation*.
- 2012: William H. Carruth Memorial Poetry Award, KU Department of English.
- 2012: Outstanding Graduating Senior, KU Department of English.
- 2012: Research Experience Program Certification, KU.
- 2011: Global Awareness Program Certification, KU.
- 2010: Mary Klayder Scholarship, KU.
- 2008-9: Miscellaneous Scholarships, *Irish Foundation For Educational Excellence*, Chapman, KS.

Publications (Poetry)

- 2016: “Instinct”; “Recapitulation and Conclusion”; “Terrapene ornata ornata”. *Posit*. Online (forthcoming).
- 2015: “A Vessel for Water”. *Poetry City, USA*. Print & digital (forthcoming).
- November 2015: “Museum Label #8”; “Museum Label #16”; “Museum Label #8”. *GTK Creative*. Print.
- November 2015: “A Riparian Zone”. *Foothill*. Print & digital.
- July 2015: “A Cure for Migraines”. *Fourculture*. Digital.
- February 2015: “A Home of Our Own”. *Words Dance Publishing*. Digital.
- Spring 2014: “The Neighbors”. *Canyon Voices*, Issue 9. Digital.
- Spring 2012: “A.S.L.” *Kiosk*, Issue 46. Print.
- December 2011: “Human Sexuality 101”. *Blue Island Review*, Volume 2. Print.
- Fall 2011: *Comma, Splice*. Print.

Publications (Fiction)

- Summer 2015: “Two Bearded Nuns in a Texaco Station”. *The Odd Magazine*.

Editor

- 2015: *12 Inches of Sin*. Art catalogs, Volumes I-IV. Las Vegas, NV.

Service

- 2014-Present: Curator & Committee Member, *Neon Lit Reading Series*, UNLV.
- 2014-Present: Committee Member, *Emerging Writers Series*, Black Mountain Institute.
- 2014: Volunteer Presenter, *Department of English Graduate Student Orientation*, UNLV.
- 2013-2014: Intern/Volunteer, *Contemporary Arts Center*, non-profit 501(c)3, Las Vegas, NV.
- 2011-2012: Vice President & Event Organizer, *Amnesty International @ KU*, Lawrence, KS.
- 2011-2012: Information Desk & Art Cart Volunteer, *Spencer Museum of Art*, Lawrence, KS.

Courses Taught

- 2016: English 205: Introduction to Creative Writing, UNLV: 1 section.
- 2015: English 407A: Business Writing, UNLV: 1 section.
- 2014: English 102: Rhetoric & Composition II (Travel & Place), UNLV: 4 sections.
- 2013: English 101: Rhetoric & Composition, UNLV: 2 sections.

Conference Presentations

- February 2015: “Do we What / It's our Want / Can we Party': Repurposing Song Lyrics as Poetry.” *Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations' 26th Annual Conference*. Las Vegas, NV.
- March 2014: “Locating 'Pura Vida': Re-articulating livelihood and individuality through a poetry collection, *Cost Coasts*.” *On the Brink: An Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference on the Social, Cultural, and Material Implications of Risk*. Reno, NV.

Readings & Events

- 2016: *Neon Lit*. Creative Reading. The Writer's Block, Las Vegas, NV.
- 2015: “Ravish the Republic” Book Launch. Creative Reading with Visual Presentation. Velvetten Rabbit, Las Vegas, NV.
- 2015: *Neon Lit*. Creative Reading. The Writer's Block, Las Vegas, NV.
- 2015: *Retinue: An Erotic Multi-Sensory Fashion Experience*. Poetry Written for Short Artistic Film. Sin City Gallery & *Blazing Art* at The Phoenix Lounge, Las Vegas, NV.
- 2013: *Neon Lit*. Creative Reading. Trifecta Gallery, Las Vegas, NV.
- 2013: *Taproom Poetry Series*. Creative Reading. EIGHTH ST. TAPROOM, Lawrence, KS.
- 2012: *Big Tent: Stories & Poems in 3 Acts*. Creative Reading. Raven Bookstore, Lawrence, KS.
- 2011: *Undergraduate Reading Series*. Creative Reading. KU, Lawrence, KS.

Professional Experience

- 2015-Present: Docent & Collections Assistant, *The Neon Museum*, Las Vegas, NV.
- 2015-Present: Assistant to the Creative Writing Coordinator, *Department of English*, UNLV.
- 2013-2015: Graduate Teaching Assistant, *Department of English*, UNLV.
- 2014-2015: Writing Center Consultant, *Writing Center*, UNLV.
- 2014: Summer Office & Collections Assistant, *Marjorie Barrick Museum*, UNLV.
- 2014: Acting Gallery Coordinator, *Contemporary Arts Center*, Las Vegas, NV.
- 2012-2013: Barista, *Henry's on 8th Street*, Lawrence, KS.
- 2012: Orientation Assistant, *KU Office of First-Year Experience*, Lawrence, KS.
- 2011-2012: Columnist, *University Daily Kansan*, Lawrence, KS.
- 2010-2012: Desk Assistant/Security Monitor, *KU Student Housing*, Lawrence, KS.