

# SCAR LETTERS

By Theodore Worozbyt

Beard of Bees  
Chicago  
Number 39  
March, 2007

# Contents

<i>The Center</i>	1
<i>Gnosis</i>	2
<i>Salamander</i>	3
<i>Mercury</i>	4
<i>Vagaries</i>	5
<i>Forger</i>	6
<i>Motive</i>	7
<i>River</i>	8
<i>Open</i>	9
<i>India</i>	10
<i>Three</i>	11
<i>Goodbye</i>	12
<i>Vellum</i>	13
<i>Cesium</i>	14
<i>Loving</i>	15
<i>Literature</i>	16
<i>Familiar</i>	17
<i>Permutations</i>	18
<i>Recovery</i>	19
<i>Canvas</i>	20

“Cesium” and “India” previously appeared in *Alice Blue*.  
“Open” previously appeared in *kaliwodowhirl*.  
“Goodbye” previously appeared in *Margie*.  
“Gnosis” previously appeared in */nor*.  
“Permutations” previously appeared in *Word For/Word*.

## The Center

I returned to the Center prematurely. Naturally experiments had progressed in my absence. Under a silver leaf the size of an elephant's ear something fleshy was rotting so I twisted it from the hairy cord. An as yet unnamed breed of spider had written three silver stars into the rosemary's churning stillness before it carried its gold and black stripes away. Six stainless steel cages shone like rain lifting upward or stents where pulp balloons might ripen a watered sun. I went down the path of rounded stones. Hordes of the unseen, whispering and trilling in the brilliantly engineered grasses, could emerge at any time. My clothes were clean to the point of sterility. I could not help but notice the diorama near the red door. On display were photographs of livestock being electrocuted and marked on their cheeks with a hot iron. The scar letter was S. Smoke rose from the animals. In the air was a heavy scent of hibiscus. When the examiner came rattling through the Silver Queen corn I dipped my head to study the printout of my organs. When I stripped the ears of their sheathings it was the noise of pearls spilling from torn paper. The pomegranate I snapped from the low tree was not the ripe one. Each in turn gave me that same sad and sly look of loving. Some shook their heads slowly. What was it that had brought me back? I held the thing in my arms. It flexed from time to time, writhing in its wraps. I was ashamed and frightened. But I could not fling it away.

## Gnosis

Turns out the radiologist didn't know thing one about radios. I stood there in my stocking feet and waited for the music to begin again. Being generally good with small motors I would mow and mow the lawn stoically with a white hand towel draped around my neck. I was stimulated by the reports of the optical scienteers. *Because of the particular reflective and refractive qualities inherent in the molecular structure of the chlorophyll molecule, the wavelength perceived by the human eye as green is in fact repulsed by grass.* Thus grass is all other colors. Impossible, impossible! was the catarrh violently discharging itself in the chambers of my thoughts. Grass and vert are green. Reading is black surrounded by white. If not, what? A barely perceptible hum underfoot that turns out to be electricity or some other invisible fluid? A basket heaped with unadjusted watches? The forests filled with white tigers. Fire came from god's beard. The sun rolled, a chariot wheel flaring its treads across the clouds. Starlight: angelic punctuation on the carbon paper of midnight. New York City sewers crawled with titanic alligators before debunkers in rubber boots stepped in. President Somebody was smoking an Egyptian cigarette and several papers didn't get signed before the prognosis began to resemble a trumpet: something gold around a hole.

## Salamander

If not for the rock the salamander wouldn't twitch in the rain. The red twin doors stuck on one side, the one nobody used. An insect has left me with months of agues, a lump of greenish brown under my hip skin. The liquid on the keys is sticky. I knew ghosts who smell like turtles and put the erasure of the sun in a shoebox. If you walk before dawn in the grass by the river you will die. Make no mistake. The grackles knew. I grew corn, Silver Queen, sweet on the tongue as bees. My tulips bloomed in the shade. Incarnadine and saffron are their names. I breathe in deep the smells of feculent chemicals because I am clean in my yellow windbreaker, terrified of stings. If I had been in love just once more I might have made it through the membrane separating microscopic gauze from immensities. The pinhole was supposed to make an image on the other side, on the foil. It was the only safe way to look without burning out your eyes. The rock gave a sucking sound when I pulled it from the leafy dirt. The salamander wriggled like a starry midnight sky with feet and eyes in my palm. When I put the salamander back, the rock fit wrong. White and flat, the pebble roof contained my mother. The day was cloudy, the total eclipse invisible. Underneath the row of skylight windows she moves around in the kitchen and the black and white tv is on. She is watching Andy Griffith as she cleans. His wife has always been dead and he doesn't wear a gun. In my hand, in the rain, it stopped moving when I turned it over and pressed my finger to its bleached belly, as if touching by then meant anything but how it would be remembered.

## Mercury

After a while nine planets dropped out of the book and the book went to Germany on a boat. Civilizations crawled across the floor from the glow in the wall with iron spears and pointed hats until the king threw a jar of ice water deep into my gagging pillows and the star exploded: click. In panels in the morning paper women got dragged by the hair and they were true. Abby was verso as were hints about blood and soda. Andy Capp was drunk. Dear Science consisted of smells boiled from tubes, collections and marks. I kept it in a red box that opened with twin doors. I waited in the shed for a spot of radium to glow. In the guestroom of my specimens my parent's Polaroids slipped from the tallest shelf into a pile of something else I was climbing for, and all the while the echo of a third man was playing the zither. I unearthed a glass eye, nearly indistinguishable, from a foxhole with a pair of shepherds, and buried it in a beaker of iron filings. I grew candied wasps on a string. My magnets were weak. Mercury might have been delicious silver mirrors globbed like paramecia, I don't know, but turned its eye closest to the sun in the artist's faceless conceptions. Gold was gaseous there, lead bright juice. The other side was frozen dark and slept. I pushed it around in my palm with a fingertip. It broke, coalesced, and broke again, trembling.

## Vagaries

The doctor's watch I hadn't won showed up in my black box. It was square and dully metallic green, like the carapace a beetle has shed. She wanted a baby, she said, and I was moved to tears and mentioned while we hugged that we should meet back here at 2:30 because the party was large and we might get lost. On the radio was, as always, news of the war. The loyalists were taking a beating, but expected to resurge in a fierceness born of nationalistic determinism. I remained skeptical but proud of the god which had made such men to die. There is no explanation for the vagaries of loving. When I rose to greet an old friend someone sat on the triple-dialed watch and it divided into many indistinguishable parsings. My sense of destiny. My illegality. My illegibility. All of the valuable currency was lost in the shuffle to mend things. The couch was striped with many colors and so a fitting place to depart from in search of the bar. As I sat on the stool it grew clear that a bored *garde manger* had been busy constructing elaborate garnishes for sandwich plates that no one touched. They were too pretty. The radishes were cut into shapes that resembled Delphic gazers. Without the watch there was no hope of finding her. It was time, I knew, to go. I didn't mind how hot the streets had become because my head had been touched by a hand of water. I didn't mind how far I had to go because I knew there was no getting there.



## Forger

While the forger applied signatures to bootleg Balthus canvases I took notes for the biography I planned to write. Back then I planned a lot of books. Why Balthus, I asked him. *Two kinds of greed lie extant in this world*, he said. Money and sex? *Nope, death and nostalgia*. He swept his hand backward to the stack of canvases along the shadows of the wall. Wyeth, Remington, Benton. All with rather brassy and cartoonish signatures in the lower left hand corners, as if he'd cast them in melted crayon. All of them hastily painted on canvases picked up at Michael's craft store in the strip mall. A mild clarion issued from his computer, a trumpet in a dream. It was a message from a prospective buyer, asking for provenance on one of the Balthus paintings, a head of a bleak-eyed girl on a gas-blue background, that he had listed for seven hundred dollars. This is what I saw him write as I looked over his shoulder: DON'T HAVE NO PROVENANCE OF THIS PAINTING. IF I DID IT WILL BE MUCH HIGHER. I DON'T HAVE THE TIME ARE THE MONEY TO HAVE IT AUTHENTICATED. I JUST GO LOOK FOR THEM. IT'S THE REAL DEAL. It was silent shouting, a real performance. The last thing I remember him saying to me that day turned out to be true, though I didn't confirm it until much later, when I saw the label on a bottle smashed in the parking lot behind a bar near my home. *Everclear isn't just what some people call moonshine, it's a brand name, too.*

## **Motive**

Some small, forgettable creature, a rodent or a bird, is screeching in metallic pain just beyond my window. I stand, the sound ceases. My body grows heavy. I go outside and peer among the broken terra cotta pots and extension ladders that I hide in the bee-thickened bush beside the sill. When I close the door behind me the sound recommences, a shrilling agony. I sit down and plant my bare feet on the Iranian rug. The hideous note fills every corner. I look at my wrist like a doctor taking the pulse of a ghost, the watch keeping nearly perfect time, its tiny arms and teeth sliding over thirty-nine jewels. It is the same result, again and again, when I try to find the suffering thing. I pour a martini from the shaker and sip. Sterile flecks of light wink from the crackled glass. As the sun goes down the shrieking gives way to fear and silence. Now and then I hear a weakly drumming patter, as of cramped wings or forelimbs, come from what seems the inside of the plaster wall. My sweet baby brother must have struggled so, even as our father watched him.

## River

As I walk, the circular road begins a downward grade. The black dog beside me quickens his step and I begin to remark unnatural metallic shapes rising from the grassy woods — arcs with radial spines, as if giant wheels had been buried in the ground and the rain and wind had worked to expose their hidden constructions. The silence in this dry heat is like my sweat, clammy and appalling. Then a dim rushing sound penetrates my ears, as though insect swarms were hissing en masse through the sky. But there are no insects. There is only the road, the dog, myself, the growing number of metal shapes winking from the grass like half-buried faces, the sky which is suddenly darkened but does not promise rain. At the bottom of the road, I know, is the river where the water flows smoothly and is cool to drink. It is the river which makes the sound. It is the wind made by the movement of the water. I am going, with the dog, to that river, so we may trace our slow path to the crashing sea. But when we reach the bottom of the road smoke is pouring up from the banks in black gouts, the river is a vein of bubbling tar, and many machines are shrieking as they compress hordes of soft and familiar shapes into blocks for transport. A large round mirror made of polished steel hangs from a rusted scaffolding, in its center a small hole. I move closer, to look through, but see first on the ground a yellow-throated bird, tiny, tiny as a moth, which has flown into the mirror and broken its neck.

## Open

When I open the red feeder I find a pair of barber's scissors. I put away the ladder and give myself a quick haircut. Mites scramble invisibly into my ears. In the trees figs swell and crackle, shedding brown syrup on the thrushes' wings. There is no excuse for my tears. When the delivery truck comes I am choosing between chameleons. Two men climb out wearing hoods against the dark clouds of wasps and flies. I see their articles of lading are covered with familiar markings but not words as they begin to carry many boxes inside. I say I have not been expecting this and receive no answer. I shoulder my way in. The boxes are sealed with glossy yellow tape. I take out my knife to look. I am knocked to the ground. They are kicking at me and yelling. *Get out of here, go away. These boxes are for the barber!*

## India

Who knew the mother sauces would become water? That you could see fat flecks in the blood like snow in a crow's eye? That the nautical clock would magnify under glass and grow greener than Argentina? I replaced the small letter I never sent to India with a jar of crystallized honey one autumn when the grapes bore. I clarified it in a *bain marie*. I need the same surgeon who put my crushed feet back together, his bags of golden plasma. I suppose burlap is fair material for the sacking of lucid sleep. What was concentrated is now thin. Turnips, parsnips, small onions, these are gone from the roasting pan. Peeled celery. French food in analogue. Edith Piaf on vinyl. These are curiosities I toast with my can of beer. Her name was a country, a black-eyed flower. What does it matter that I will die, dreaming the spice of her hair?

## Three

It is after midnight, and I am so hungry I will chew anything without a face. I keep three empty drawers in my kitchen. One for the shadows of future knives. One for the caul of brandy-colored light that wraps the squeals of the dying. The last I reserve for secretive notes of affection. I rub my cracked hands with ghee and swallow gulp by gulp a rope of boiled linen to pull from the other side. I tie my butcher's apron on and slip out the back to tap speckled eggs in the trees, scoop golden fat from the carapace of a turtle broken on the side of the boulevard, scan news of the Eastern conflict from my neighbor's newspaper. My palm is smeared with swollen liver. The undersides of sweetgum leaves remind me of vermouth. If only someone would touch my verminous shoulder! But it is plainly too late, my mouth is starving. My breath stinks with rot. I smile my smile of terror to myself. In a sudden glance through the charcutiere's painted window I see an old man bent in concentration over a barrel of salted casings he can't unknot. But it is only the streetlight. The man is myself, the window a reflection of my sallow face and slowly wringing hands. And what seemed so clearly to me a barrel just a moment ago is nothing more than a clustered rope of sausages casting its shadow across the counter and the floor.

## Goodbye

I never wanted to live a long time, he offers, as they mark the dotted lines. His chest is shaved and dyed orange as an Easter duckling's. It waddles past Thumbelina zinnias toward the plastic pool. The nurse seems depressed, or at least pensive. They still sell painted turtles, don't they? she asks. He knows what they smell like, but doesn't answer. Instead: Did you know that coconut milk isn't what's inside the coconut? She loves him for a moment. He is a straw. His knuckle itches, a no see um in the socket, and how many times has the beach sand scoured his feet? The nurse suspects that we all are parallel lines. He can count, he stumbles in the sickening grass, he breaks the duckling's pencil leg in the sun. No one is at fault here, she tells him, it's only that the doctor is busy weeping in his office from the pain of a cruel and erotic goodbye. Drugged feathers whirl under his ribs. His fingernails shine clipped and clean. His garment is blue paper. *Give them water!* is what he cries, as she fits the rubber kiss to his lips.

## Vellum

A messenger collects the bundle of replies and is dismissed. The examination continues unabated. Dusk enters through the grates. I am seated at a small wooden table before a varnished map of the Eastern theater and a lamp shaped like the planet Saturn. The questions are the same as I have seen a hundred times. Ropes for binding lie scattered like tapeworms on the floor. *It is not yet a matter of devices*, the proctor explains evenly. Smiling, wan, yellowed in the smoky light, he folds his hands on the burgundy leather melded to his rosewood desk. He gestures with his chin. I am handed another sharpened pencil. The attendant moves across the floor like a half-swatted fly and returns again with a signature of folded vellum. My upturned face: a slop pail. The pages are exquisitely illuminated. Chains of sausage-like entrails extracted from the cavities of the penitent represent question marks. Periods are flowers. I notice a vial on a table near the lamprey tank. I wish for a pill. The water in the tank is ultravioletly lit. Their mouths press against the glass, sickening red peonies, whorled and thick with teeth. *The lamprey fastens onto its prey and rasps out a hole with its tongue. An anticoagulant in its saliva keeps the wound open for hours, or sometimes weeks.* The proctor dips his hand into the salted water.



## Cesium

The dogs are running under the open moon, a deathly joy in their nearly silent sweep across the grass, along the edges of the field, where pines lift against the clouds. The hour lays a platinum bar, like a hand across a forehead, over the measured dark. Ladybugs sleep in clusters and the vines climb colorblind through muscles flying in the slowed dew. If you do not know how to find me, this is where you will find me, the microscope in my outstretched hand. Worms become sphinxes, and if only it were a matter of jewels, of oiling the infinitesimal gears of dead men's movements, then I might learn how time was never keeping, never. But I stand to clasp the flesh that is your flesh, and measure the distance to your eye. Dawn is nearing, and the smudge in the sky is rounded from soft metal, silvery gold, that explodes when touched by water. Every million years or so a second will be lost. When I dip my hand into the fountain, the dogs vanish into the woods and you are gone.

## **Loving**

When I wake from a long and dreamless sleep my limbs are stuck to the green sheets. The bedclothes come off like a bandage and I gaze down the length of my body to see that my nerves and vessels have risen through my skin and formed a caul containing me in the merest web of filaments and glossy tubes. I rise, leaving an imprint of myself in flecks and tatters of flesh on the bed. I stand before the long mirror, naked, watching the work of my blood through the veins and arteries. I am so thirsty. When I try to lick my lips they bleed. When I open the refrigerator door the cold air hits me like the truncheon of a ghost and I stumble backwards into the wall, smashing capillaries, rupturing veins, and release a boiling pot of blood down my back. I make my way to the medicine chest. I cover myself with opaque ointments and swallow many capsules. I recall that love might save me still, that love might save us all. When I begin in relief to weep the tears leave bruises in my eyes.

## Literature

I planted a garden of colossal vegetables, those three-to-a-pack seeds you order from the back pages of the catalogues. Win, place, show. I wanted a ribbon, the cordon to indicate my time spent watching and tending mattered. It did and it didn't. What I got was a shadow carved across my face in the shape of a pumpkin. I didn't have a forklift and I couldn't, after checking, afford to rent one. I wasn't sure anyway that when I lifted it it wouldn't shatter. Anything that heavy. Wouldn't it be yellow and rotted underneath? I would sit beside it with the literature, patting its musky rind and drinking a can of beer as the air thinned with the October light and stank of mums. I liked looking at the photographs. Tomatoes big as my head were exciting to think about, slices that covered the dinner plates of my neighbors. The color of the hornworms was identical to the leaves. Their undulant pulses, their nauseating softness, ate our work while we slept.

## Familiar

The game show host interrupts her answers and explains the terms of sudden death. *The files are shredded and locked into a cabinet for disposal.* The consolation is a one way ticket back to an afternoon with Cavity Sam and Mystery Date. The nurse is frightened. Bitten by an insect she went legally blind. Her buzzer won't function so her questions are already too late. Her teeth, small and numerous, publish the final language of disappointed seraphs, *the ones who died in our care.* His syndicate grinning won't stop. *Are you the kind who will tenderize my grip as I go, or will you lash the grinning stitches?* The red tie pours down his chest. His glasses spread across his face and hook into his ears as if those were the only two senses. I am familiar with the rules of the blue couch. I lay my body down and plug myself in. I take the tweezers to Mr. X and his silly heart.

## Permutations

The watchmaker lived in the caboose of a stationary train. He invented fresh ciphers for the Vietnamese and then just as quickly returned to the bench where his tools lay shining in chiseled troughs. On Wednesday he was fabricating mechanical replacement parts needed for the war effort. Being synchronous was key. There was a deadline but then a tin-flavored violin smashed against his arm and rainbow worms flowed like thought from his pupils. His jaws clacked. His heart burped a bloodmark. A crock of cabbage gurgled underground in the minister's garden. All I did was climb out of the ditch, a lime-stiffened cloth wound around my head. My statement, as requested, was obscenity-free. The investigator announced a handful of identities but no one seemed to be listening. He passed Monte Cristos to those few whose babies were memories. The lesser of us stood around with marred timepieces and felt as if we might weep in concert. But this moment seemed as gentle and protective of our hopes as the scent of coming rain. The remains of his home opened like a psychotropic infomercial for some essential innovation no one watching could possibly afford. It would rain. An ecclesiastical picnic was snuffed. Snapshots mingled black and white tongues with the grass. When it started to rain I huddled under the canvas bivouac where an acolyte stood filling bowls from a pot of carp soup.

## Recovery

When the doctor comes into recovery to tell me I will never see again the remote control is still in my hand. What a relief! Now comes the spiritus mundi to vernissage sensation and loose the gazelles crouched like crap-shooters in my skull. I am so weary of that pus-bright bulldozer piling autumn's scarlet and golden mud into the corners of my heart. Of tall lustrous women and the museums of their smiles. The blue and purple agitations of oceanic vision. And especially Picasso. To sit in the Adirondack chair, feeling the cold gas reach my nose just before a sip of lemonade, the sleek glassworks of catbird trees squeezing their glissandos into my ears. That, dear reader, is the leisure not to look at frames clicking by and believe it life. Now my alphabet has run away to join a musicale, and the day and all its blisters slips into smooth continuum. Only death's communion will lay a deeper shadow over these lips and tongue, my amanuensis. I take the doctor's hand and smile my warmest smile; the smell of his fear is terrible.

## Canvas

In Kingdom Come, by underwater fountains where our beautiful dead kiss the fragrances of sleep, I skin a spring lamb in the windless dew. I bleach every treasure map in a bottle I toss among feathering repressions of the sea. A long journey of forgetfulness rounds the horn and a painter coils on my prow. I was a thief, and so I am a thief. Beside a potbelly of burning embers I drape the black cloaca of champagne photographs around my frozen shoulders. I pour myself out into the swelling canvas. The sun blisters my lips and heaves silver light around my brother's rusted locker. The sextant's ordinals spell the caul while terns wheel and feed. The boom hits not the skull of my microscope but the wind. The wind has no face but leaves a cutting signature. The caulk is failing, the salt has gemmed my beard. In my country, gorse runs through wild strawberries and a dark-haired woman closes the cellar door and brings new wine to the table. There are so few chances to be a man and I miss them. The stones grow brown in my mouth. Each one is a whisper.

THEODORE WOROZBYT is the author of *The Dauber Wings* (Dream Horse Press, 2006).



Beard of Bees books are freely redistributable, and are produced with Free Software.

Copyright © 2007 Beard of Bees Press  
Chicago, IL

[www.beardofbees.com](http://www.beardofbees.com)