

*Thin Bits of Evidence*  
*Object Collage*



The following prose poem series is written  
off of the objects pictured above.

## ***Thin Bits of Evidence***

*In the summer of 2006, a neighbor tried  
to burn our house down. These objects are  
from the thrift shop where he worked*

Silver Bracelet, \$1.00

A simple form is best for first. There is something to say of eternity here, one life in one forged curve. One can take sides in a physical world where a metal ring forms in and out. One cannot take sides where the inner eye sees a rounded line and the lamp sees silver. Each meaning molten to the next in the metal itself, each meaning forged by heat.

Smiling Squirrel Pin, 40¢

He started by raking the leaves. Then in winter he shoveled the walk, scraping, scraping. He played with the neighborhood children, gave us mints and other objects. He sent twenty pages of handwritten Bible verse, ending with I want to be her daddy. We told him our daughter had parents. Next the porch was heaped with lingerie. I talked with his landlady, not the police. You have to spread the word but not by bothering folks, she said. Months passed.

## Faux Stained Glass Jesus, price unmarked

The lamb and her flag, bleeding ribbon in wind, ten flowers with crimson centers. The son of God points south to where the air is said to be warm. One teardrop rests between his eyes like the mark on a Hindu wife. His halo puffs a trail of dust. His frame is thick plastic painted like wood, his image thin plastic painted like glass. The Lord is not angry, just worried. You should, he thinks, but I'm not sure you will. And the caged lamb smiles for some reason.

## Bicycle Playing Cards, 60¢

He watched me paint the fence, so I went inside. We drove thousands of miles to the ocean. While we swam, he set the fire. We came home and found the attempt. We came home and everything was fine, except for the fact that he'd tried. The detective came, and I gave him the letters and objects. Our neighbor confessed he had wanted to make our walls black. One lady in that house, can't remember her name, told me not to talk to the other. This made him angry, though it never even happened.

## White Doily, 20¢

In every life is a scrap of beauty, man or mechanically made. In every life there is justice, encompassing the arc of the life or pushed to the far corner of the piano. We went next door to tell his landlady her tenant was in jail. She told us he kept stuffed animals, like a child would. She invited us down to see his basement room but we declined, given the upcoming trial. I'll give that boy a talking to when he comes home, she said. You don't go setting fire to people's houses. My partner said, He isn't coming home.

## JC Penney Button Covers, 40¢

There's a button for every time I said no. Because of these small round refusals, he took a match to our house. Now three blocks over, he sits in jail. I drive through quiet rain. You should see the brush along the highway now. Five days into frost, it is fire.

## Deep Sea Jelly Candle, 30¢

Main Street, under construction, is suddenly underwater in an early morning dream. Waves drench signs for the fall election. The mayor almost died from heart failure last year, his daughter from cancer this summer. Now they coach sixth grade girls' basketball. I love to watch them breathe. The rumor flies he is out on bail, but I walk to the store anyway. My partner keeps fixing the porch. Our daughter plays in her Halloween wig and everything moves a bit slow. I return home with canned sauerkraut and call the county jail. It is not true. See how we go on.

## Tetra Terra fauna Vitaminized Hermit Crab Meal, 60¢

Our neighbor pleads guilty at the pretrial hearing. There will be no extension of what is seen as our shame. I do not shake until I teach the next day, and then I do, in front of my class. I stretch so far into what I am not that words for the starving repeat in my head: apple, ethoxyquin, feather meal.

Wooden Smokey the Bear Ruler, 10¢

There is something about a balsam ruler rubbed by November finger. Squash in the oven with wine-baked chicken, the house almost clean, air almost pure. Life is almost even and contentment almost measurable. My child is almost happy and my partner almost well. I renew our home insurance policy. We are close to the line either way.

Silver Teaspoon, 40¢

The arsonist's absence in small things: snow coating the walk, our standing house. Two phone books delivered to the porch next door, one marked owner and one marked tenant.

Cliff's Notes for Dickens' *Hard Times*, 20¢

Life here is easy, a ruler-straight layer of cloud behind western trees. In a ship I would sail through branches, torn barnacle in hand. This December is so mellow that it seems the world will end. Three blocks away they bring him meals, just like his landlady would do. The food isn't bad and it's free and they bring it. He never had a choice. This is one theory.

Wooden Earrings, 50¢

I shovel his landlady's walk. He is no longer here to do it. I think, if I write of this later, I am making a poem by shoveling. I am writing without writing; I am pushing at meaning. I am writing with this shovel, telling in snow.

Caged Bear from Glacier Park, 50¢

From Ruben Bentz to John Harell in Linton, Texas: As a Gift. Four walls at the county jail, feet in heavy glue. Everyone pays attention when he burns, and otherwise no one but the minister. The addicted mother, the absent father, brain damage from the start. I had a sister too, but ma dropped her down the steps. She falls into the gift's red mouth.

Four Stem Bumpers,  $\frac{3}{4}$ "', 10¢

Our neighbor shelved this object in 1996, and no one has touched it since. He didn't think of it later himself, nor did the woman up front who counts purchases slowly and wrinkles them into bags. The package is smeared with its price in green crayon. It would never be bought so I bought it, to the sound of the passing train.

Blue Glass Candleholder, 50¢

Confront and avoid the older brother who murdered. The blue dress of the old woman was limp, marked with water and blood. Our neighbor longs for communion and pork rinds, for the word that almost saves.

Pink Bath Soap, ½ Bar, 10¢

In Fargo, 1978, his mother was evicted and he burned the landlord's house down. There were three other arsons as well. His confessions are pieces of paper I have never seen, never touched. Yet because of his crime, we are unclean.

## Genuine Ace Hard Rubber Comb, 20¢

I can play this comb like an instrument, one that hums whenever I breathe. The words to the song are, Where will we go? How will we get there? In his basement room, he kept a picture of his mother. His landlady brings us dented cans of green beans and tells us she looked normal, like a real nice woman. In a crazy season, stuck in a numb dark year, one can usually force a smile.

## Empty Frame with Symmetrical Flowers, 20¢

When I was young, I had plenty to say. I became mute when older, held in by the curve of my own chest cage. Seeing end before beginning: awful use for imagination. This frame holds what I choose, half the white laundry basket and floorboards in sun. Alarm clock, chest and magazine rack. Windowpane, driveway, mud puddle. The minister piles our neighbor's things in the back of a tan pickup. The truck pulls out of the frame.

Mood Ring, 25¢

Tilted sideways, the clear stone is red. Sociological theories of violence make each victimizer victim. 54 years and two moods: saved and angry. The courtroom holds the minister, judge, lawyers, landlady, stenographer, press, and us. Our neighbor's hair is knotted. His voice rusts as he speaks. The wooden bench becomes my back as the prosecutor reads our daughter's words: The fire was a nightmare. In blaze orange, he gets eight years.

*Touched by the Fire:*

*Luke/Acts in the Today's English Version, 60¢*

My father read books like this once, back when he fumbled through winter days of teaching in dark glasses. Ohio transplant in Philadelphia soil, spaghetti dinners for Methodist young adults, my mother across town in her nursing school cloisters. They searched in similar pages. The Vietnam War burned in passages. They were only starting out. Almost forty years later, I do not read the book that brought them together, but I know such miracles do occur. Heat can crack the seed.

## Doll Hands, One Pair, 10¢

These hands full of air cannot sign what they've seen. They have witnessed blunt crimes and deep errors. Every unmade doll and misinterpreted gesture, every plastic souvenir from every accidental war. They tell me it could happen anywhere. They assure me he'll never come back. But we're going, my own hands sign. I form leaving with my fingers.

## Goody Foam Rollers, 10 Large, 50¢

We decide the house put out the fire, good spirits from 1896. I can sit on the porch again this spring as the elm buds green and thicken. Last year I gave him an Easter basket; we were grateful for his work in the yard. How stupid that now appears. He is gone and no one watches me plan a life in another town. As he wished, we will not forget him. The mind does not close without opening. Neither does the world.

*This prose poem series was written in 2006-2007.*

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