

**ROBERT**

--John Farris

He wasn't much taller than I was so  
when he would tell me  
to get my hands  
out of my pockets  
we would be  
almost eyeball-to-eyeball,  
tired cocks circling each other for  
openings. It  
was a ritual  
we went through  
whenever  
we spoke, my  
removing my hands quickly from their  
refuge, allowing them  
to dangle as if broken from my wrists

before he could. He would ask  
what I could have wanted  
in the world, and what I meant  
when I told him, he never touching me unless I was  
not quick enough, and  
gripping my wrists  
he would inquire, almost kindly,  
if I could be a man before he tore them out, and  
would almost laugh when I would insist  
that that was what I wanted, the

words stumbling from my mouth  
as if drawn from a book, and  
thick as blood.

## LORE

--John Farris

Kemkeleba House abuts  
Pedro Pietri Way: the lord of Kemkeleba House  
sits high in turret of his castle

mixing excrement for color: "A  
little piss makes a good green," he says. "I only like  
the good shit. For the blues  
I listen to Miles Davis, Shirley Scott, Gilly Coggins, and Frink.

Looking out that window,"  
he says pointing to where the  
sign Pedro Pietri Way is clearly visible,  
"Makes me see red, red, and more red. It's too much. I'd put that guy  
behind the eight ball if I could, but he's dead.  
My hair is white. Around here," he says, the purple plainly apoplectic,  
"I'm the institution! Get me! When it comes to whirling squares  
and Fibonacci, I'm Monet -- I'm Monet!"

## LESSON

--John Farris

"Nationalism makes you crazy," you said pointing out  
Sister Amanata talking to herself  
in her elaborate headdress, her  
colorful buba and skirt. I remember  
she had few teeth, and spat her words out  
like a machine gun  
spraying bullets  
at everyone and at no one in particular  
inside her borders. Noticing you,  
she would let loose  
a barrage of language unrecognizable as anything but her own,  
the few garbled syllables she had at her command repeated  
after a pause, during which she  
would glare at you as if reloading her clip.  
It was her own cosmos, with her own gods.

## AESTHETE

--John Farris

I've got a great mind for clutter: books  
I haven't read, photographs, music I never listen to  
making motes of dust dance in the mottled  
sunlight of my room like sprightly visitors from the ethereal.  
I am most at home where the floor begins to slant  
dramatically towards the precipice behind  
my crouching chair and the buckling walls of disoriented brick  
exposed by crumbling plaster and flaking paint that  
casually threaten to implode notions of construct  
into chaos: I must make order out of this.  
I search for truth in the disarray  
of newspapers, I will find unadorned  
beauty in the abandoned webs of spiders, grace  
in the irregular geometry of sheetrock, the march  
of mounds of ragged clothes that rise  
like foothills along the sagging couch, slowly.

## ACQUISITION

--John Farris

After being unloaded from the truck and unpacked the masks  
were lined up row by row and identified each  
in its turn as being Fon, Bambara  
or Senufo, inspected carefully for larvae then arranged  
like with like,  
the great Senufo

bird allowed pride of place in the lobby  
due more to the sheer dimensions  
of its size than to  
the lifeless  
snake dangling from its wooden beak, the

huge wings that cast their shadows over the entire collection.  
How proud you were pointing out this mask or  
that as being Baoule or Dan, the great bird the avenging messenger  
of some god whose name you stumbled over

root and branch: a prize collection,  
you thought eyeing the rough-hewn wood, sniffing it for any  
evidence of blood like the cork from a bottle  
of good wine. That's how you authenticate this stuff,  
you said; blood. The stink of blood.