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.
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.