THE THIRD DEFINITION OF CALM

by

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Abstract:

Levine, David Nelson (M.F.A., Creative Writing)

The Third Definition of Calm

Thesis directed by Professor Ruth Ellen Kocher

_The Third Definition of Calm_ is a narrative built out of a series of short, non-narrative poems. The narrative constructed out of these poems is not a story or linear progression of events so much as it is a progression of attitudes. The poems focus on a husband and wife and the dialogue between them. There are two types of poems in the book: poems made of short prose blocks that are addressed from the husband to the wife, and smaller, sparse lineated responses. The two voices are distinct and different.

At the same time, the book is constantly resisting its own narrative. Shifts in location and tense are constant. The poems lean heavily on the surreal, sometimes to the point of nonsense. Nonsense here has a purpose. The communication between characters is strained to the point of failure. Nonsense is a form of miscommunication.

Rather than being static moments that build into a coherent narrative, the timelines and events of the poems overlap and change. The end result is a series of contrasts; a clearly defined relationship between clearly defined characters is illustrated by a swirling world of surreal and obscure objects.
Anger is a Form of Refreshment
The Sun is Sleeping Through This Vacation
Let me See You in a Great Flood or Wave
Brimstone
The Emergency
I Always Confuse Surreal With Smile

I want bounce in the slight of your eye, little notes in your footsteps. I wear places as pockets.

Last night, you were bogs, radishes, sea tulips. You floated on the surface of my sympathy.

If May becomes moon, I'll lift you like a brick.
Renewing Our Vows at Mile-High Stadium

Tonight will bring me awe in the count of your ribs. Until then, we wait beneath 25,000 people.

I point at center field, remember the car's flat tire and worn upholstery, the new paint a pile of pig-colored brown.

We both back reason. We'll discover differences between a prolonged melt and a small shift in gravity.

None of that matters and nobody cares. In our minds, the crowd goes wild.
Out West

When the car won't start, your hands hide a dangerous face.

We accept different things. You ask for well-timed panic and balk at my careful application of force.

Wires connect steam to silver metal. In the distance, the mountains here have guns.

You find a hotel room and become a spider dodging sun.

I woke up on a road.
I Remember Now;

You rolled over towards me in the middle of the night, our blankets a faulty breeze. You said you were hungry.

No, we'd twisted our fruit. You said, I wish I could be hungry.

The highway pulsed along with a hawk in the thick fat air.

There's a chart on a beige wall somewhere that defines our phenomenon as slipping, and another that claims we've assaulted our dusk.

When that tree fell in the front yard, fungus had been in the wood for years. That was me, underground, sucking moisture from the roots.
**Ears in the Present Day**

You told me that the bees were being unreasonable.

You turned to me. You burned smoke slowly in your rabbit fur teeth.

You said, the bees are being unreasonable.

I wasn’t sure if I’d react. I set a small object on the kitchen table.

I had a rock in my hand. Out the window, pebbles grew mold.

When I closed my eyes, you were blurred. This has nothing to do with mold.

That question about moving forward and the careful prospects of aluminum, you didn't come up with that yourself. You saw it on a street sign on the day it rained mussels.

Later, you'd explain it like this, with a swig of pink and heavy coffee.

For me to move back, I'd have to sit inside your stomach.
The Audacity of Lemons

I asked you to scatter the implications of a lovely nothing. Instead, you were in chickens, doubting rain.

You believed the day.

I mistook a mess of indigo for feathers and called you up with armfuls of blame. I heard what you were saying; I gave like a tin can in spring.

There's a tree in the distance and boulders knock our course.

When our views turn upside down, I will ask again, wondering why that horse is sleeping on her side.
Each Breath is an Apology

Your words weren't flowers.

You said trouble with hornets in your throat.

We were sorting through hibiscus on the day you asked me.

I had seen hips that began just the same way;

an excess of fortune in a grave, bodies and tumbles of dusk.
Wind Shakes the Night

The kids were asleep, so we took crashing lessons around our cups of coffee.

Light from underneath a door went ignored.

The word of the day was cope. I had it wrapped in tin in my back pocket. You taped it to your forehead and said the mood was off.

Later, you taped it to my forehead.

The storm had passed, but none of us felt safe coming above ground. Not while we breathed like staircases.
First Morning #2

I am asleep in this crow morning. You roll over and tell me that you feel like a pigeon in a hallway.

Your shame and thick linens cloud a bird heart in the window. My face is small and wet.

You feel like a pigeon trapped in a hallway and I don't know how osmosis works.

You outweigh disaster. When I forget how to build birds, I'll build you instead.
This Time, Wind is a Shortness of Breath

An argument was lodged in the throaty corner of the bay window we weren't having.

This is where you told me you were stuck. I made a note of it on the ceiling. See that note?

It's on the ceiling.

You were knocking on the front door, distracted, fleeing for the cupboards.

Later, the old copper mantels were breathing. I had to find my own air.
Cotton Response

The wind brings needs
In a moment of good and up and now.

Gather firewood, wonder of chain-link,
Definition on a bedroom wall.
See measured breaths,
Struggle for attention.

The next good thing in a haze.
Incompletion makes me realize

I do
want to be quiet.
We Call This Travel

When the moon parted, my car slanted at the road. I turned the wheel hard and itched at your smiling impulses. I am troubled by this beach.

A seagull is leaping through a wide ring of fire.

You see these blueish waves, this ancient pile of sand. I find conflict. Our cycle is rotting in feathers.

The wig on your face is wearing a white flag. It calls my lack of character, character.
We Measure Progress in Circles and Odometers

I have overapplied my spine. Heat rises in buckets from the steaming engine. Your panic flaps like a bird's.

Everyone here watches.

There are eyes in the car's cracked red hood that stare into negative painted steel.

The crowd cooks heat-swirled air. Their stammered concern, the form of worship. I am the center of this parking lot.

The car doesn't need new oil. We must redefine new oil.
You Celebrate New Jewels

You are someone who thinks in moods,
in conflagrations of cinnamon and mud.

You pour thoughts in a diamond wastebasket,
flush vanity through fire.

I am tightly wrapped around my words.
Forget Rain

Here is my complaint, in the clouds and the swimming milk sky.

You were banging dishware, letting in obtuse spirits through the screen door. The metallic sounds had eyes.

I couldn't eat while our faces settled. I found gardenias for your barely mottled sun.

I replaced the broken greenhouse panes with reflections on a shaky plane's wing.
Scene Without Rain

One day, I found you in the broken greenhouse, building pottery out of incorrect measurements of weight.

Your fingers were clay and white paint chipped from the trim of the windows.

You asked about the space I fill. I showed you fifty stones in the bad part of our creek.

In the future, our hands will demonstrate the following prisoners.

I was pushing hungry, but you tied knots in the wiry patio fence instead.
You Go To Sleep Every Single Night

The air had feet. You intimated moss, but wore density in your skin.

I trembled with a lime. Your birds were lazy and tethered to a string.

My favorite music keeps making me sick.
**Alone Together at the Large Blank Show**

There are two chalk-covered children in the back of this concert hall. Don't tell me how to curl my lips, just spit into my mouth.

Your insistence here forces me. Paint yourself blue in an effort to outwit fire. I am waiting out the ground.

Machinery brings the men on stage towards us. They throw a hulk of towels. I've got your teeth somewhere on my body. This cover is not chalk.
Dinner Date With Uncomfortable Tilapia

Everybody wishes they were quiet storms. The waiter spills bread on your dress and the crowd forgets to cheer. Please stop marketing your worry.

Please order more wine.

You don't complain when I staple the check to your clothes. Stop talking to your throat.

The duck's heart is frozen. There's a knife stuck inside it. This night is a fish in a gas mask.
Pretty Scene, Late June, 1992

You laugh like an unopened package. Six white ducks float in the lake.

Last night, your mind was buried in neuroscience. You explained the cold hexagons of a brain's spatial relations.

Electricity and warmth vibrate in the heart's translucent dusk.

I point at the lake. It is our lake. I carry large stones to dam the muddy water.

You can't pin down time with fire. I flick a cigarette at your ankle and nothing happens.
This Food is Every Food

You weigh tonight's dinner against our failing magnitude. I don't want to chew on wood. This meal is missing my fume and flare.

Dessert is a block of carbon. This is how we make the soup.

I am boiling my empathy. I am catching breath that isn't mine. Out beneath the hedges, you shove soil in your frown.
My Family Always Supported My Goals

I lean against a railing, miss a you that isn't yours, the slip against the space you dedicate to one-legged emotions, the soil where you plant sympathy and rust.

My earmuffs whisper of something bigger. I know this already.

I know that already. My briefcase is sucking in light. This shape we've carved, it's painted on my chest.
Our World is a Measurement, Not a Movement

I am a statue built too close to a moving bus. Fluorescent lights blur the bedroom. Here, our wings beat in time with the tune on the radio.

I remember that something clear is going on. You can hide these tiles with shadow.

Twenty minutes will push you the way wind moves, but for now I stick to your stomach like fog.

Sometimes I swim in poems that aren't even mine. I remember that half of too much is still too much.
The bees speak of a garden
That flowers false and envy.

I can go there and I do.
Underneath the torch-eyed patio,
Don’t dance against wind.
I see nothing that would incriminate you,

nothing that slips or shivers
but the shadow of oval weight.
I keep motion
in compartments
and breathe.
If This Were Every Morning, We'd Be Alright

I doubt this is a heart attack.

No, really. I doubt this is a heart attack.

The whip that is your mouth sucks on a stone.

I can't find the intimacy of milk. Snow becomes wonder.
Neither of us Think About the Things we Think About

You built a small hovel in the eye of my nostalgia and invited me inside.

There was slate in the foyer and cookies bathed in tin. Toothpicks funnel through the oven's sweet mud.

The bathroom disconcerted cold. I would sneak into nothing, but I left my lungs in the window's fog.

In the summer, when the air was you inside my forehead.
In This Opposite of Light, I Can Still See

These magnitudes are dry air and hydration. I told you to gather water, to deliver comparative respect.

You're tired of nightly drawstring formalism, can't keep competing with every precious stone, every hair and puff of smoke I am learning to repeat.

Something stiffer, more refined, the desolation in the secret to being somebody else.
Remember Rain That You Forgot

I was standing by the window, making my neck vanish.

You brought me peaches, called me your egg. I couldn't.

In the future, I will sink into a dull pink mattress, eat thread there. Springs will rot.

You have your objections, but this is my window.
First Morning #8: Every Morning

Animals are not made for artificial light. I see you in the corner of my eye and reconsider the shape of my nose.

Today was a bad day.

You say, slow monopoly. You stare at the bagels in the freezer, take one out, wash it. This morning holds us at the window.

Sometimes windows function like small walls.
Worries For The Current Present Future

Our boy's pulse was bitten by his breath. You hid him.

You hid him in a cellar with caterpillars and turnip-tipped flowers. When I asked about his phosphorous, you lit and trembled.

I had an instrument for measuring the thickness of the sun.

I could hear you swaddling his bare torso in maternity clothes while you squeezed and sang.

He never closed his eyes against a camera's flash again.
The Answer is to Seek a Different Fire

One day you called me in a crush of circumstance. You said something; a crisis of salt and perfume, an unwelcome resemblance in rainwater.

Large red ants had crawled into the front stone stoop. They peeked upwards and yawned their cracking skin.

A paint bucket and a hard grey toolkit run interference with a staccato ceiling and a beating heart.

I remember you holding like a hole in a patch of sand.

An impatient dogwood flowers at a cloud. I might not be breathing well, but I know where you smoke.
We Breathe Exhaust and Expectations

I am constantly your moss. It's alright; I've grown accustomed to drawing you with stone-colored charcoal.

Today is a day to extinguish. Decency's just a trick of the light.

I blame the earring. Your teriyaki salmon catches fire in the oven. We call it atmosphere.

Even blame becomes structural. It's like we're living in a boat.
The Question is What Fire's Seeking Out

I will hold you in this smoke. Your mouth, the warmth of steel, the hunger in an angry hornet. A grapefruit under my arm, my body in this hallway.

I asked you for an explanation. Please explain comfort to these men in my living room.

Tomorrow becomes large and cyclical. Chain-link wraps around the rusted blue slide, the trees come together only to split against each others' shade.

I keep returning to my wet pockets of light.
Even a Commute is Getting Out of Town

A woman sits next to me on the southbound train. I am bad at identifying rage.

I think of you, how we'd go out and hate a stranger’s daughters. I consider little Viking helmets on the ice cubes in my drink.

You meant to say something wonderful. Your words were tied to a ribbon. You tied the ribbon to everything.
A Blur Between Admiration and the Front Yard

The large oak stump sprouts a mushroom, tripped leaves spill into a dogwood's pink tangle, drift into focus and rip out fenceposts.

The birds in this scene are duplicitous wedges. You find me in the yard, bring a flat sandwich, mix your arms with mine.

Pears are bending trees. The air's a school bus filled with cotton, an oscillation in these measurements. I can never really tell where I live.
Iron Response

I am not a scientist.

All these colder closures, these sealed hallways you hid,

they are not a threat.
You wanted something tangible.
You would not hold me.
Any other man
would let me breathe sky.

I want wings in my head.
I have crafted this mass
out of tile and hardwood.

I am tired of your flailing paper jet.

Your world will crash into my wall.
You plant yourself in a new back porch
and point out all my trees.

The birches know.
I can't see the agency in your ice.
I burrow into dirt beneath high tension wires.

I am not a scientist.

This must be the right place to hide.

Look At Me
I am a failure with a cellphone in the middle of this department store. I hide myself in tuxedos and question my own breath.

Your mouth a mockery of language, an interest in proportions of doubt. You criticize my problems with animals.

Our combined efficiency creates nothing but a shopping bag over the head of a mannequin.
Kitchen Positional

I am filling my home with familiar strangers.

One day, you asked me about fossils.

You were an orange peel in a pile of ash.

I've lost my willingness to stand and bend.
My Voice is a Source of Strangers

I want to hold security the way this house holds water.

I can deal with you. I can deal with three eggs, scrambled, in the morning.

Nobody leans on our roots. Everything goes deep into the ground.

Being here's made me too sick to leave.
What I See When I See You Looking at Me:

How could I be so footless? The porcelain balances on a small spinning disc. This isn't politics; our bodies wash ashore on loop.

We have planted our chairs here. Leaves dry and die on these wooden planks. I cover up a hole in the wicker with my mouth.

I will eat hierarchy and resolve our bias.

You and me, I swear we could be squirming.
This is Not Winter; This Feels Like Winter

You challenge me to build a better room. I know I can't stay here. I am tired of the door against my back, the window shades and dressers.

You stick with your blank contingency, this wall between neglect and more neglect.

I wrap myself in ten year old magazines and cannot keep the cold out. All this time in one place was supposed to be comforting.

You stay cold as well. Insulation works both ways.
The Third Definition of Calm

Like a man in a second-best hat, I disagree with your assessment of distance. The neighbors are no longer on top of us.

I sit by a rusty fire, watch logs melt. My mood is a hangover in a corn maze. I am always surprised by my own blood.

There is nothing wrong with my body at the moment.
I Can't Stop Dreaming About Myself

Here is where my eyes become victims of the carcass of your actions. I see shades of you in the mouth of a toaster oven.

You accused me of attaching myself to radiators, concrete slabs, and mud. I promised you I've left these objects in the past.

One week later, you find mud in my back pocket.

I can't deny it; I've broken many of your possessions. I've snapped flowers off their stems. I even crushed a vase, although you never questioned my push or pull.
You call this an experiment
in conscious acceleration.

I haven't seen these trees before.
A world presupposes new formations
of heat, rock, the breath of chalk.

I saw the trees.
This place eats birds
in each tile of faith, each form.

I take my birds and go.
Anger is a Form of Refreshment

You made a solution; aqueous, dead, mixed with cardamom and lime. You sold it in cases of dead wood and winter bottles.

You sold it around town in thin, vaporous rails.

I am cleaning up the mess you left. It's not metaphorical. You spilled candle wax on my sweaters and melted my dining room floor.

When you and your rocks took the gutter, I thought.

I doused my rage with cold steaks and you smoked a whole couch.
The Sun is Sleeping Through This Vacation

Now, we express ourselves in a series of dilations.

Pupils and milk mix together in this harmony.

You take a bite out of a bite out of an apple.

This isn't Heartless Beach. I'm still sick of surprises.
Let me See You in a Great Flood or Wave

I.

I cross out your reflection in the creek beside the driveway. You seem inspired by these ripples. Birds scatter. Their wings represent excited doom.

This house is a weird kaleidoscope. I just see a lot of you.

I earn my shadow when I look at you; your endorsement of theft, the rumors spread over our rooftop, the way your mouth shifts between small and huge.
II.

You were willing to buy my kind of sabotage. I'd string up snow to mute your shouts of consequential sound.

I knew you were afraid of magic. Nobody here is without magic.

We are not talking about self destruction. We are not talking about ten leaves on the surface of the creek.

We are not talking about airplanes and false jewels, the bad pavement on I-70, your troubled ability to mistake prairie for prairie.

You've put too much work into becoming unreasonable. A lot of things are overwhelming. We're not farming stars.
III.

I can't explain the mechanics of agreement. I know we came to Kansas to leave Kansas. I know today is sad. If you want to call this knowledge metaphorical, alright.

But now, I've bent my exasperation sixteen different ways. You say you don't believe in metaphors. You say you're fishing for a dress in sand.

What I have learned has been lost to your comment about crows. You decorate this cave with words.

That's not what caves are for.
Brimstone

You caught me doing when you saw how I felt for the fence during winter.

I kept taping cherries to your zodiac. Don't worry. The fleas merely add to the weight of the dog.

Feel the warmth of warmth. You'll fall apart and loiter.

I will make you yawn.
The Emergency

I.

We are walking down the street. There are fireworks everywhere. You suggest we sleep in puddles.

Every puff of smoke is a mention of fertility. Instead of swallowing pills, you make a fake face.

I cover myself in chalk for you, but you are not amused. I reach past optimized lines in your treatise against babies.

I see sirens and I want to start a fire. I don't know how I feel.
II.

An ambulance with the wrong address pulls up to our front door.

In times like this, you patronize vanity. You bring the paramedics mirrors and ignite smoke with floodlights.

The ambulance vanishes. There is haste in the heat of our possessions.

My hands and your body are different silences. Silence is the price of living with men.
Frank O'Hara – Personism: A Manifesto

To me, O'Hara claims that a poem need not make any argument because a poem is an argument in itself. Therefore, the poem must at all times be immediate and sudden, as well as available for contemplation and deeper reading.

Graham Foust – Necessary Stranger

*Necessary Stranger* proved to me that tiny poems can be as complete and full and substantial as longer ones. Instead of focusing on the larger cumulative aspect of my thesis, I tried to do everything through the immediate moments of the poems. *Necessary Stranger* was the best example of focusing on the immediate that I've seen.


The narrative aspects of *The Third Definition of Calm* are heavily influenced by these two books. *Autobiography of Red* calls itself a “novel in verse.” I'm not exactly sure what the distinction is, but the book is a collection of poems that functions as a narrative. *The Beauty of the Husband* is a book of poems that is very dialogue heavy. Although *The Third Definition of Calm* doesn't use much actual dialogue, the poems still resemble a dialogue in their focus on a speaking character and a character being addressed.

Arda Collins – It is Daylight

I started working on *The Third Definition of Calm* by emulating the form of the poems in *It is Daylight*. The poems were originally longer-lined prose blocks, before I narrowed the margins. This sort of block let me think about line breaks in terms of beat and timing, rather than purely sonic elements.

Dan Beachy-Quick – Mulberry

*Mulberry* taught me that, even when dealing with extremely heavy and sentimental material, sometimes it's best to just write what you mean. *The Third Definition of Calm* mostly deals with nonsense and surrealism, but there are some direct moments as well.

Travis Nichols – Iowa

*Iowa* is an example of indirectness. Even though the indirectness is caused by intricately merged syntaxes rather than nonsensical imagery, it still helped me in demonstrating how much (or how little) sense is necessary in a poem at any time.

Joshua Marie Wilkinson – The Book of Whispering in the Projection Booth

*The Book of Whispering in the Projection Booth* demonstrates how the prose block can be a necessary form.

Eric Baus – Tuned Droves / The to Sound
Eric Baus demonstrates how a noun or noun phrase can stand in as a sort of variable for a larger collection of nouns or objects in these books. He has a grammatically sound, straightforward approach to the surreal that I often try to emulate.

**Jonathan Franzen – The Corrections and David Foster Wallace – Infinite Jest**

The two characters in *The Third Definition of Calm* are heavily influenced by Gary from *The Corrections* and The Moms from *Infinite Jest*. There are also influences from my personal life, but these are the two most apparent literary influences on the characters.

**Elizabeth Robinson – The Orphan and its Relations**

*The Orphan and its Relations* (and maybe *The Book of Whispering in the Projection Booth* as well) is my favorite example of how sequences of poems can function. Although *The Third Definition of Calm* isn't technically divided into sections, the response poems serve as an unofficial divider. Figuring out how and where to divide the book was one of the tougher tasks.

**Antonio Porchia – Voices**

*Voices* relies on a consistent form and narrative voice, similar to *The Third Definition of Calm*. Porchia is able to create diverse worlds and logical arguments within each poem despite this repetition. I tried to create similar worlds in *The Third Definition of Calm*.

**Eleni Sikelianos – Body Clock**

Voicing the wife character (who speaks in the *Response* poems) was much tougher than voicing the husband. Whenever I got stuck, I looked to *Body Clock* as an inspiration for this voice.

**T.S. Eliot – Anything**

T.S. Eliot is included because I can't really picture writing anything without his influence. I often rely on objects as emotional illustrations, and this is a technique I stole from Eliot more than any other source.