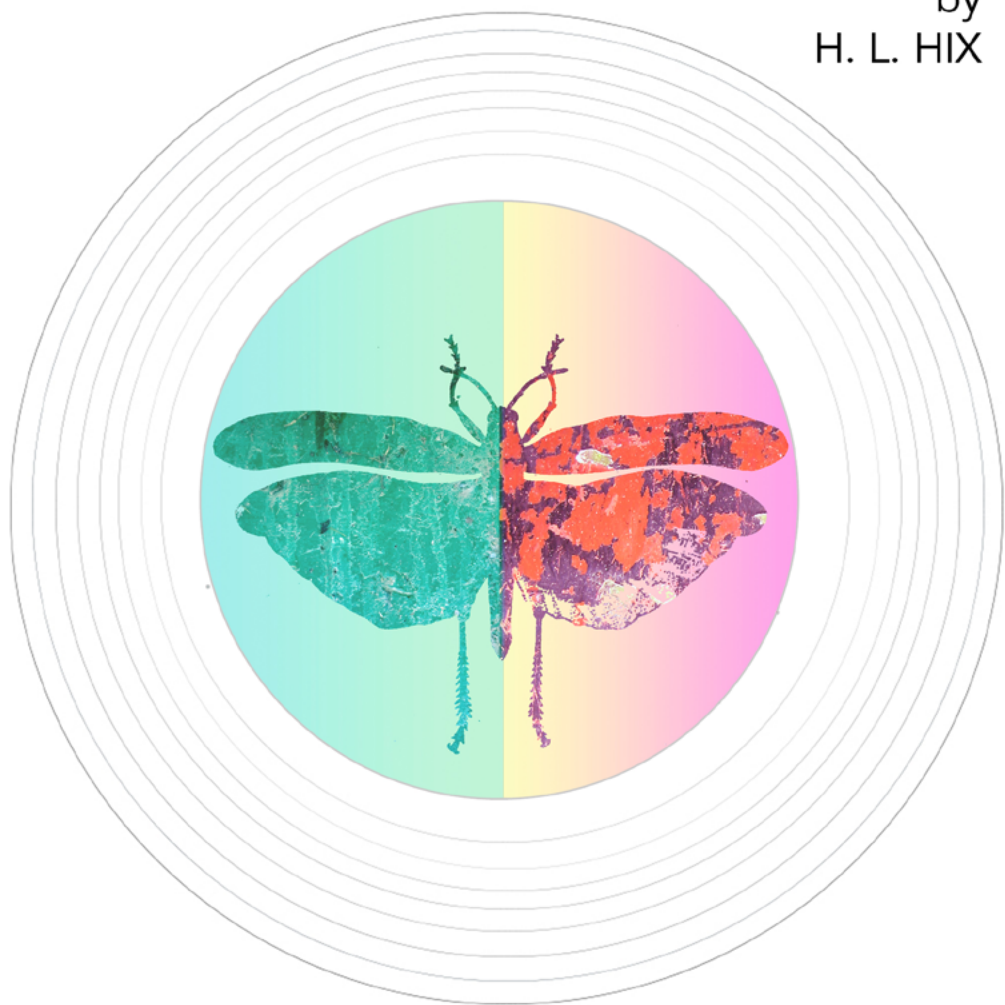


A&Q

by
H. L. HIX



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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#15

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In the Essay Press EP series, we give extended space and time to some of our favorite authors currently developing new book-length projects.

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INTRODUCTION

—H. L. Hix

What meanings might I mine, beyond meaning enough?

We all are provoked to ask that question occasionally. When I converse with my lover over dinner, I will understand perfectly well all that we say, but when next day I awaken to find that he and his belongings all are gone, I will revisit our dinner conversation to look for additional meanings in what he said to me then (did he warn me he was leaving, and I didn't catch the warning?) and even in what I said to him (did I imply something I didn't intend to?).

In my writing I try to keep that question of further meaning live. I try to be asking it not occasionally but ever. In the essay that follows, I have pursued this meaning-mining by "writing through" three interviews, listening for an answer in each question posed, and

for the question(s) in each answer given. (Even this particular substitution we sometimes perform in "real life," as when we translate a rhetorical question into an indicative or an imperative.)

For each question posed by an interviewer in the three original conversations, this essay contains one statement, and for each response one question or set of questions. In this writing through, I have retained the order of the originals: the first answer given in the essay ("*Capers enough chafe curfew, create one criminal*") derives from the first question posed in the first interview ("*God Bless, and many of your books, are centered around an idea—they are projects, or 'capers,' as Craig Paulenich would call them. What draws you to the poetry project? What's in it for you, as a writer?*"). The second answer here derives from the second question there. And so on.

The first of the original interviews was conducted by Karen Schubert and published in [AGNI](#), the second was conducted by Alex Stein and published in [The Literary Review](#), and the third was conducted by Stephanie Dugger and published in *Grist*. I am grateful to the editors of those journals for giving ward to the interviews, and especially to the interviewers for engaging me and my work with such generosity and acuity.

I associate Hegel's "We learn by experience that we meant something other than we meant to mean" with the last line of Kate Northrop's poem "Winter Prairie": "I speak to you; clearly someone else speaks." I take each statement as designating one kind of "truth event" to which I hope my writing remains always open.

A&Q

Capers enough chafe curfew, create one criminal.

Does my wholeness make whole what wholes I make?
Or am I made whole by making wholes whole?

Does material wholeness model spiritual?
These material wholes I make, do they make spiritual
wholes?

Would capers enough be already capers too many?
At what cost, this my incriminating caper-cravenness?

*Straighten your back, close your eyes, open your hands,
spread your arms.*

Do my hungers distinguish me from the plankton-hungry?
My protocols from those of the tentacled and ciliated,

the sessile and ambient-dependent, sweeping the
current?

Can it count as hunger, this my being hungry, if I am never
not?

Ways to change want reasons for changing, and selves to change into.

Does knowing *of what* I bear witness entail knowing to *whom*?

To bear witness, wouldn't I need first to have been borne witness to?

If I go on record, does it matter where that record is stored,
whether it is maintained, and to whom it is accessible?

Considerable time has passed, but just look at yourself.

Which proves more often poisonous, my policies or my rhetoric?

Does either harm others more than it harms me?

Could anyone infer the former from the latter?

Could anyone infer the former from the latter, to what end?

Does my hiding from others my hidden premises also hide them from, or instead reveal them to, myself?

Such extensive scarring! So many marks of space and time...

That's what the chorus was chanting, that we choose between mistakes?

If I accept the sentence, I can't skip the sentencing?

First person is the collective voice, the voice of very God.

Yes, but why would anyone listen when I speak, I who know from experience to distrust myself?

If I can lie to myself, can I know when I am lying?
If my honesty has limits, am I not always outside them?

Wouldn't my listening *for* truth (from myself or from whom else) imply that I am not listening to it?

Does my claim that I am one demonstrate that I am two?
Of my protestations, which does not prove the rest false?

First we choose the object of desire, then we have the impulse.

The facts behind the story, or the story behind the facts?
If history made, how can it have been made by, language?

If I remember events from my life in words,
am I remembering the events, or the words?

What if not words distinguishes what of the world
I have been granted access to from what is denied me?

If words did the revealing *of* the revelation,
then what if not words was revealed *in* the revelation?

I worry less any losing than all this being lost.

How remain open to what has been closed to me?
How ready myself to receive what I know will be withheld?

Teach me structure. Teach me, structure. Teach me.

Where did it go when it disappeared into the
background?
What am I watching when I watch what I watch disappear?

Go on. Be more specific. Don't try to lie to me.

That shimmer at the feeder, the first rufous of the season?
Glint, trill, translucence held together, held in place?

The asymmetric figure eight its wingtips flurry?
The blur I can see, created by the movement I can't?

Listen to me. I'm warning you, the same way I was warned.

To listen, must I know what I am listening for?
Must I be sure I will know what I hear when I hear it?

What if what I listen for proves inaudible?
What if what I listen for is the Inaudible?

Can I imagine a new way to listen, invent its means?
Practice a listening unlike any listening I was taught?

Continue listening, past hearing anything I can hear?
What if my *not* hearing any warning *is* the warning?

Structure is thinking. If you understand structure, you understand.

If structure structures understanding, and understanding understands structure,
then what structures structure, and what understands understanding?

I know I'm supposed to see structure, but what's that hum I hear?
What happens to *edgewise*, set by interval instead of angle?

My fingers crossing one surface sense the texture of another.

I thought I was one person in one place, but maybe not?
At each moment I thought I was *in* that moment, but no?

If I asserted it insistently, would I make it true
that the sunlight here compensates for this stone-splitting cold?

Can I remake myself the way a clear night remakes
a desert landscape? Cold moonlight, constellations aswirl?

I know the world is bigger than my mind, but how *much*
bigger?
Just how small does that make me, how insignificant?

And about my role here: am I out of place absolutely,
or only a little more out of place than most?

Don't think you're the first. It is raining has always meant I am crying.

Maybe the world doesn't just *match* how I feel inside?
Maybe my feelings take place outside me, in the world, as the world?

It matters less what I overheard than that I overheard it.

My being always left off lists, is it my fault?
Did I do something badly, or fail to do something well?

Has my acting badly always been because I *chose* badly?
By whom and by what should my introspection be guided?

Everything has changed. People are talking where things are happening.

Does my having hope mean I have no expectation, or does it mean the expectation I have is unfounded?

Are past events *only* past, or also always present?
Appearance vs. reality, disappearance vs. what?

Should I find a pattern in events, or impose one on them?
Or forfeit pattern, say events blur together, call it *flow*?

Would wisdom give me to live more fluently in the world, or withdraw me from the world? Would I acquire wisdom

by immersing myself more fully in events, or by abstaining from them? In "God watches," what does "watch" mean?

Should I be trying to find better information, or trying to better the information I have?

Have I failed to realize the better life I imagined, or failed to imagine a better life? How tell them apart?

The glitter of events blinds you to the glow of objects.

Effervescent melody or steady quiescent hum?
Can I choose how to hear what I see when I look?

List for me survival strategies against winter this cold.

What if all this time we've been wrong to treat the
question
as the answer's source and the answer as the question's
end?

Wrong to want the question to end and the answer to
begin?
Wrong to prefer proof to paradox, settled to unsettling?

Can I wish things added up, without first knowing
what, if they *did* add up, they would add up to?

*Tell me what your world looks like, how things are with
you.*

When we say *It's beautiful, this snow*, don't we mean
this isolation of one seedhead from all else in the field?

*We all want to think things stand for others as they stand
for us.*

Does being swept off by the current count as learning to
swim?
If what I float among is debris, am I debris too?

Say it's just me if you want, but how clearly could *anyone*
declare herself unwillingly underwater?

How suddenly what will happen does happen, how swiftly
it changes what it will change: can I *prepare* for that?

Spiritual is silly, I know, but what's a better word?
Why *do* this year's fallen leaves all have markings last
year's leaves did not?

In what middle air, in what timelessness, under what sign
might we yet meet, who should have met here and now,
but did not?

It must have started early, this consciousness of being late.

If I really thought any of what I tell myself I think,
would I be better at deceiving others, or worse?

I built my own language, but not in time to live in it.

If it occurs over time, slowly as the skeleton
effloresces from the perfect patience of the whale carcass

settled on the sea floor, can I still call it a crisis?
Could any suddenness host so many scavengers?

Mystical experience. Not a mystical experience.

Should I distrust the voices just because they don't wait
for me to be seated quietly and in solitude?

Just because they don't confine themselves to darkness
and dreams?
Can I refuse to listen, if I can't refuse to hear them?

If I were in a trance, would it feel like a trance?
What does a trance feel like? Will others know, though I
do not?

It's like noises at night: wind, the walls settling, mice.

Why even *speak* of truth and beauty, purity of heart,
if not that the naming names what the names themselves
do not?

Who are we to speak at all, we sponsors of so many
contradictory ideas, we hosts of so much guilt?

What is it I should face, if not what I must turn away from?
What should I resist, if not what far exceeds my will?

Can I be at once disquieted by the falseness
of my consolation, and consoled by my disquiet?

The End ends nothing, only prepares the next And then...

When the comic tells the one about *the end*, which
reaction,
my laughter or my weeping, proves I get the joke?

*That's what makes rogues dangerous, their
unpredictability.*

Should I trust or mistrust, accept or resist, this sense that,
now and always isolated, I speak only with myself?

I thought I could distinguish discipline from routine.

Am I standing under this day itself, or standing
in the shadow yesterday casts over today?

May I not call it *work*, do you not call it *harvesting*,
all this my pacing and gazing up, waiting for a windfall?

It doesn't help me do my job, your recommending winter.

That a thing can be confessed in a letter, or that it can't?
That it has been confessed, or never will be? Which proves
its truth?

How could it not have been delicious for any god
to create *giving up* so delicious for us?

Delicious, even erotic? Which is more delicious,
the giving up, or the abjection that attends giving up?

Giving up, or being given up? Do they differ?
Is there nuanced giving up? Measured? Intimate?

Swing happens in your hips; sustain settles on your skin.

Who will tell me I am wrong to care less for rhythm
than for timbre, less for melody than for tone?

Call it fading out if you want. I call it fading into.

I lost The Lost because it was mine, or because it was not?
Because what I lost is The Lost, or because I am?

I count it one form of balance to reject other forms.

I'm often told I must choose between, but is it often true?
What if in abrading one another opposites sing?

What if what does not happen echoes longer than what
does?

If what does happen can only echo afterward?

What if I hear more singing than I can repeat?
What if I care more for the singing than for the sung?

Once breathing toward breathing, now breathing toward
not.

Seek transformation? Me, Decay? Why revise my life?
Has North changed location, that I should steer by some
new star?

How hard would the revising be, if I could imagine
the new life into which I might transform my old?

I know what to name my failure, but how describe it?
That *I* can't live up to these standards, or that *one* can't?

Wouldn't I have to *be* quieter than I am, to *hear*
what is quieter than I am? Won't I be, soon enough?

I say music, I say poetry, to name what won't be named.

How can I still fear the sensation of falling
when I know now I am falling, and have been all this time?

No one refusal need motivate, or match, any other.

How answer, claim to answer, think I had answered,
except on condition of not understanding the question?

How create new pattern except by precedent,
finding it in and unfolding it from prior pattern?

*Don't try to pretend you stayed the same when
everything changed.*

Can I choose to do—can I perform as a *decision*—
what was chosen for me, what I cannot help but do?

Is my asking still *asking* if it has no horizon?
When I say *no horizon*, do I mean *only horizon*?

*Stop one thing, start another. Tell me how you do, or that
you can't.*

Change or recognition, when I could no longer determine
whether I was talking with others, or only to myself?

I know my fear *is* fear, but is it *only* fear,
or also laziness and other moral flaws?

And what about my indecision? Have I redeemed it,
or redeemed myself, if I sing it to sleep each night?

By what name should I address what answers to no name?
Should I ask *although* I'll get no answer, or *because*?

*I keep my counterlife secret enough that it needs no
name.*

If I have two lives, one real, one not, where do I live?
In the real life, in the unreal, or in between the two?

Only from another life can I listen to this one.

Does truth I discover by selection and sorting match
what by assembly I secure against instability?

If what I discover had to be already there,
did what I assembled precede the assembly?

In any tone, overtones; in any voice, overvoices.

With whom should I, and how well can I, identify?
Am I speaking through another, or being spoken through?

If I call it *love*, does it stop being self-avoidance?
Would calling it *renewal* make it no longer erasure?

First isolation. Only then the mystical.

Did I vanish *with* or *into* the vanishing?
Once vanished, always vanished? Or should I fear return?

Can vanishing be described? Would perfect description
be a vanishing? Did I vanish into description?

How *could* they bear on one another, since the description
took so long and the vanishing happened in an instant?

First isolation. Then the mystical. Finally the void.

What, you think I haven't been listening all this time?
You think I couldn't say it all back to you, word for word?

Can I be crusted like a stem of sage with fine white grit
if I *feel* perforated, permeable, porous?

Author Bio



photo credit: Nancy M. Stuart

H. L. Hix's recent books include a poetry collection, [*I'm Here to Learn to Dream in Your Language*](#), and an art/poetry anthology, [*Ley Lines*](#). He teaches in the Philosophy Department and the Creative Writing MFA at the University of Wyoming.



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