

## **Information Desk: An Epic**, Robyn Schiff (Penguin, 2023)

Reviewed by **Lindsay Turner**

Robyn Schiff's fourth book of poems, *Information Desk*, has this as a conceit: according to the book's afterword, Schiff worked off and on for years behind the information desk at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The double function of Schiff's book mirrors the position Schiff once occupied: the six long odal poems that make up the book are both conduits for information—in all the complexity of the word “information” at present—and windows onto a self, the person behind the desk, the writer. Schiff has always written poems of velocity, and *Information Desk* is a marvel of momentum. In her ragged six-line stanzas, Schiff follows serpentine, glittering chains of thought and association mostly having to do with artifacts and insects, leaps over logical gaps and picks up again, lets the language lead where it wills and catches herself in the act of doing it. The resulting mass of verse is both rich in factual information and biographical confession, which balance each other as the book takes shape: one would not perhaps want to read poems of such length and intensity without both poles.

Below, for instance, a description of a cockroach being nightmarishly and parasitically zombified and used as an incubator by a jeweled wasp leads, via description, to a memory of seeing a cockroach, through a gulp of guilt associated with the memory, and then marvelously, via simile, back to the wasp: [the wasp]

... drags herself  
towards the roach, who makes  
no move to defend itself, and bites off just  
one of the crisp  
antennae who among

us has not been queried by—as  
I was once from a crack  
in a cabinet  
in a kitchen I was sharing with a friend  
whose ex I should

not have slept with. Well, that

was unexpected. I haven't  
thought that trespass through in  
a long time. Poems  
are as good a place for the past as the grass  
is for the wasp... (3)

The wasp, an important figure across *Information Desk*, is in fact three different wasps, each of whom provides the occasion for an invocation poem before an untitled section of poetry more or less about the information desk: "To the Jewel Wasp," "To the Oak Gall Wasp," and "To the Cuckoo Paper Wasp." In these poems were perhaps less in an art museum than in a natural history museum, as, with a morbid fascination that exceeds even the entomologist's, Schiff details each kind of wasp's special and diabolical capacity for parasitism and reproduction. These poems set the tone, so to speak, of the whole, in which the rich and strange tips with breathtaking speed into the horrifying and the violent. The machinations of the cuckoo paper wasp to twist and subvert ("the first crisp tool in a small set of / perfect lockpicks this slick / wasp learns how to twist / is time [71]) resemble those of the poet herself, as the combined effects of vertiginous sentences and line-broken syntax forcefully disorder time, space, and logic.

But as in much of Schiff's work, there's also a sense that the poetry itself, or language itself, does its own work, and that it's the poet who stands by and watches it happen, sometimes even with shock and dismay. It's in the nature of verse to turn, and in the nature of the ode to turn back. Sometimes verse turns against you, as with the unexpected memory of trespass above or, here in "To the Oak Gall Wasp," leading to an ending that is not the ending you want:

...Don't look away.  
I don't want to end  
this poem bleeding but the wasp does eat the  
wasp, and up through  
the top of her head like

the goddess she is, enters the hell-  
scape. (41)

This is part of Schiff's particular gift: her lines are muscular and controlled and yet so often open onto moments where the bottom drops out, moments of fear and vulnerability into which she—and we—are led by fact or by language, like a trap. Heightening this effect are the points at which the time and space of the book's writing re-emerge: the backdrop is early 2020s America (the lines preceding "Don't look away" are "this is // an American transition of / power" [41]), a time at which omnipresent political violence in the U.S. seemed newly salient. Following the threads of language set in motion by close observation of objects—art objects, objects from the natural world—consistently shows the degree to which historical violence underpins them. The book's epic side is located here, in the scale and scope of what it limns: even the most obscure facts or the most granular observations tend to lead inferences quickly towards the political and the collective.

In both the granularity of these observations and in her disjointed music, the most obvious predecessor for Schiff's work is Marianne Moore. Yet where Moore tends to draw morals, however slant, for art or life from the work of her eye, Schiff remains markedly materialist—materialist both in the way she works down and down through layers of history and composition, probing (here) the sources of pigment for paint, and materialist in her actual delight in objects, names, facts, things, measures, oddities:

How I love to touch  
this world.

Its cactus spines and parasites—  
its cochineal, from  
whose tiny steadfast bodies, born  
starving like all of us,  
derives the reddest dread. (59)

The world, is beautiful and terrible, and from behind her information desk, Schiff directs us to all of it.