

## THE ANSWER MAN

the voice on the office phone says,  
"may i ask you a literary question?"  
i don't recognize the voice:  
"sure, go ahead."

"there's this poem in a book by an author  
named milne, and it concludes,  
'hush, hush, whisper who dare --  
christopher robin is saying his prayers.'"

"yeah?"  
"you know the poem?"  
"i know the poem."  
"yes, well, i'm writing a book, you see,

and i'm in the midst of a passage about birds.  
i wanted to allude to this christopher robin  
but i didn't know whether  
he was a human or a bird."

i take a breath: "he's a kid.  
a human-kid, not a goat-kid.  
he's saying his prayers.  
he's not a robin.

also, winnie-the-pooh is a stuffed bear.  
and tigger is a stuffed tiger.  
and eeyore is a stuffed horse."  
i somehow stop short of suggesting one further stuffing.

"well, thank you, you've been very helpful."  
"any time."

thank god it was a question in my major.

## THE AMBIVALENCE OF VALENCE

in a sense, dear reader, you have only  
my chemistry teacher to blame.

when, near the end of freshman year,  
i went to his office to inquire  
whether there was any chance of a person  
with a strong F and no intention of opening  
his still inviolate textbook  
being passed out of the class,



he said, "you don't intend to remain  
in pre-med, do you?"

"god, no," i said, "i've already changed  
my major to english."

"thank god," he said, "you can't do much harm there.  
i'll give you a D, but if you double-cross me  
i'll find a way to have you kicked out of school."

i had no desire to double-cross him,  
but he was wrong about my not being able  
to do much harm in english.

#### BEACH APPRECIATION 101

the berm is coming down.  
the bulldozer is flattening it  
inch by inch. soon it will not  
even be a memory.

who after all walks around in july  
remembering a sand-berm?  
who wants to remember winter at all,  
to recall the days when the water was  
numbing and the sand nearly mud and  
the clouds antithetical to comfort?

i know people who claim to love  
the beach on dismal days, but i  
never see them at the beach on dismal  
days. also, i suspect they like those  
days a lot less when the tide breaks  
through the berm and soaks their million-  
dollar living rooms for which no flood  
insurance is available.

the people who claim to love the wintry beach  
have a name for themselves: they call  
themselves poets.

i only know of one insurance man who ever  
called himself a poet, and he didn't call  
himself a poet very loud or outside of  
certain circles and i bet he was sharp  
enough when wintering in key west not  
to sell the local poets hurricane insurance.