Susan B. A. Somers-Willett. *Quiver.* Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2009. $16.95 paper (ISBN 978-0-8203-3327-4), 96 pages.

*Reviewed by Jenny Burdge*

Science and art are too often thought of as irreconcilable fields. Perhaps the misconception has something to do with Edgar Allen Poe's "Sonnet: To Science," in which the speaker pleads "Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart, / Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?" The hardly dull reality is that art (poetry in particular) and science have a long legacy of influencing each other. Susan B. A. Somers-Willett acknowledges and re-enacts that legacy in her second collection, *Quiver.*

The book's cover image, Wassily Kandinsky's painting *Several Circles,* serves as an apt introduction to the book as a whole. Kandinsky was a theorist, and his abstract art was the product of experimentation. The painting suggests a solar system, though not our own: dozens of circles, each in a different color, float through a dimensional blackness. The largest seems to eclipse a sun, hidden but haloing with the tell-tale bleeding light of a corona. The orbits of the planet- and satellite-like circles also recall the oft-mentioned resemblance between solar system and atomic model. These implications bear on the poems.

An epigraph by Kandinsky and then a dictionary entry for the title introduce the poems:

> **quiver. *v.*** (1) to tremble with a small, rapid motion ***n.*** (1) a portable container for arrows (2) a collection or accumulation; an arsenal (3) in mathematics, an oriented graph of loops and arrows between vertices (see figure) (4) in physics, a diagram representing the matter content of a gauge theory that describes multidimensional objects used in string theory

Beneath this entry is an illustration of the Jordan quiver, the figure mentioned in (3). This quiver has a single vertex from which extends a line that loops back to connect the vertex with itself. The graph looks like a circle with a dot at its zenith and an arrow at its nadir. It reappears on the title pages that dissect the book into six sections.

Also titled "Quiver," the opening poem precedes the first section and begins by pondering the mathematical graph, yet manages to haul the suggestion of each denotation into its lines. Here:

> . . . the archer Eros
> had no clear target beyond what physics could explain,
>
> thus making the success of his own affair
> improbable.

This poem prepares us for the book's rush of ideas, from scientific to mythic, as well as the violence and love and desire that seem to be inevitably reflected, or even produced, by these ideas. Inevitable, perhaps, because in the physical world, as in a quiver graph,

> all known objects connect—
>
> points, lines, vertices, the ubiquitous loop
> of Ouroboros consuming his tail.

The first section, "Dark Matter: A Love Story," is devoted to a long poem of the same name. In it, dark matter is personified as a girl who wishes "to be spectacular / like an unlit match imagining to burn" but who is overlooked because she can't be seen, because her "shining blonde sisters," the stars, attract all attention. Finally, a scientist, a bit of a Peeping Tom in this narrative, discovers her and devotes his whole life to her and to listening to the "whispered / lullaby of her black / and hissing tongue." Through love and music, this poem deals with the visible and invisible of the physical world.

In "A Natural Order," the second section, we are introduced to the characters and themes that appear in the rest of the book. Einstein's theory of general relativity is expressed through sentence logic, explored using Einstein's own life. We learn the order of a house is like the order of a hive, in which each bee "for all its humming, / has no voice" though they try to "make a voice with their wings." On Darwin's travels by ship, he encounters people who are strange to him: such as a woman who is "rare / as a whale's tooth," whose "hands are quiet specimens." Leonardo da Vinci, artist and scientist both, opens the stolen corpse of a thief to learn its proportions, yet there is a surprise, an inversion when "the criminal eye . . . will study the artist."

The poems of the third section, "Survival of the Fittest," deliver creation, birth, survival, and the sexual desire responsible for it all, as well as the violence that threatens demise. Here, Darwin studies barnacles and finds in them a metaphor explaining his daughter's death, since he and his first-cousin wife, like the barnacles, were guilty of "copying themselves selfishly, folding over / and creating no variety, some of them / gluing themselves head to head in marriage."

The poems of the fourth section, "Ave," look to Mendel and his genetic experiments to explore spirituality and sexuality. In "First Sex," the monk cross-pollinates pea plants, and they "sing deep praise / of his touch." In poems such as this, where Mendel is imagined as a god figure, this sexuality suggests a Sufic conflation of lover and divinity.

In section five, "Radium Music," Pierre and Marie Curie likewise seek to understand both the spiritual and physical realms through science. Scribbling to her departed husband in "Automatic Writing," Marie writes "if there is a link between radioactivity and the spirit, I will find it."

Poems of the last section, "Praise," often suggest the cyclicality of all things, as in "Zero: A Meditation," where zero is "Ending: an endlessness." This section also suggests the connection of all things, as in the poem "The M in M-theory" (a theory that could lead to explaining all physical phenomena), where "perhaps in this universe of complements / the M is also meant to suggest its inverse."

While *Quiver* calls on diverse fields, you needn't be a polymath to enjoy the language, formal variety, and profound insight of these beautiful, honed poems. End notes provide relevant information regarding the science. Even without that information, the poems, like the dark matter, sing. They, like vertices in a quiver, connect to each other.

Like the characters of these poems, through physics, anatomy, genetics, and personal experience, Somers-Willett explores physical phenomena, yes, but with the hope that the examination of the physical world will provide insight into the metaphysical realm as well. In this way, she illuminates the evolution that science and poetry have shared.