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A Praxis Mundi

Ryan McConnell
Seton Hall University

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A Praxis Mundi

Ryan McConnell

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Steve Gehoke

Thesis Mentor

Jeffrey M. King

Second Reader

Ryan McConnell

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Dr. Gehrke

Introduction

This collection is bookended between two poems which began in earlier forms a year ago, "Praxis Mundi" and "Epilogue". "Praxis Mundi" is a poem of self definition, which set a tone for much of the collection. That it physically resembles "Song of Myself" is no mistake, as its intention was definition via a large inclusion of information, though the scale is nowhere near as vast as Whitman's was. There is an easy comparison to make with Howl as well, in the physical structure of the poem, and perhaps Praxis Mundi, and the collection of poems seen together, leans more closely to Ginsberg than Whitman.

"Song of Myself" was a moment of genesis, whereas "Howl" seems to be a more about observation and commentary. These poems are similar in that they are about the observation of and commentary on a generation by one of its own. The difference is that the observer isn't part of a subculture. The drugs and sex, in the few instances they are mentioned, do not voyage as joyfully into cultural deviance as Ginsberg needed to go when relating his experiences. What I think these poems do draw from Ginsberg in their commentary, though, is the quasi-derogatory sense of humor expressed in the recognition of his subculture's flaws. Entrenched in the various images of the horrors that he witnessed in young urban culture were also the moments of naïve futility found in sincere protests that began and ended with flipped ping pong tables or in juvenile food throwing.

Ginsberg had the amazing ability to talk about the culture he was currently a part of as if he were smiling back on it, detached. The intention was to imbue the speaker¹ of these poems with that same distance and winking recognition.

The title refers to the axis mundi and the Greek “Praxis”, which is in general the idea of putting theoretical knowledge into practice. The axis mundi is the center of the world, or in many religions the point at which earth meets the heavens. Praxis Mundi, then, is the idea that of practices as the center of our world, or to put it more simply, the theme of self centered-ness. The poem presents a speaker who, after spending his life in an Oroboros-esque relationship with his own attitudes, begins a process of externalization. From the self’s center through self-definition. If the speaker can be outside of himself, if he is no longer centered in himself, then the “axis” in the praxis mundi will become broken and there can be growth.

I begin the introduction with that brief explication to come to the theme of the works, which is growth through self examination and definition. Definition is often a positive process, by which I do not mean that it is happy or good, but that it is a process of addition, namely in the addition of titles or new knowledge. The definition that takes place in this set of poetry is destructive in nature, in that it destructs fallacies about the self that have been created for comfort or escapism. To use Paul Bove’s term, these poems are about a dis-cover-ing². The speaker in the poems does not create a new self; he does not add new aspects to his personality. He strips away layers, or layers are stripped away from him by the external world. “In a food court” and “Tutoring”, for

¹ The Speaker in the poems is in no way intended to be an autobiographical “I”.

² He coins this in *Destructive Poetics*.

example, chronicle the poet's revelation of his own flaws after comparison with the outside world, which again is a theme begun in "Praxis Mundi".

Within the process of self-discovery there are of course moments of distress. The poems place an uncomfortable distance between the speaker and the self that has to be reconciled. Remember that the speaker is trying to break the axis of his world, the center that is his "self", and has therefore become external to his own psychic structure. That stress, common to any intelligent person between the ages of sixteen and sixty, needs to be addressed, and so I focus on how that psychic distress affects a person in three stages. The first point examined is the way that psychic distress manifests itself physically. "A Night Game" recreates the way that the stillness of night time leaves the mind unoccupied, and the consequences of that idleness. "Just one Reason" is the same problem in a person who attempts to displace their mental energy only to enter the same realm of mental self-torture. "Falling Asleep to Annie Hall, which ends the "sleep" poems of the set, introduces the second stage of psychic distress: escapism. "No Beat Angel" follows the same attempted escape through a different medium to results that are no different. In both poems the speaker finds momentary solace, but hints at the temporary nature of their escape, which leads to the final point in the discussion of suffering, which is the failed aftermath of escapism. Both "The Upside of the El Train" and "The morning after" deal with the painful return from an escape and the emotional baggage that comes with the return from any temporary and incomplete alleviation of a problem.

The set ends with "Epilogue", which was originally named "American Epilogue", and was intended to a message about losing frontiers, but was changed heavily when I

realized during editing that it had become a kind of reciprocal fraction to “Praxis Mundi” “Praxis” is very openly a moment of stabbing blindly into the dark for a sense of self. The poem ends on an image of that very thing, looking out into the horizon of lake for the defining moment when water meets sky. The moment isn’t found, though, which allows for the process of definition through reflection to begin in the following poems.

“Epilogue” ends the journey, showing the mind in its completion like a map. It closes the sense of need that dominates the other twenty-some poems that precede it.

The original sketch I had laid out had epilogue placed ironically in the middle of the set. What would come afterwards would be poems of maturity and confidence rather than questioning. The idea was that after the axis of one’s world is removed from their “self”, then it can be elsewhere, which would allow for poetry about the outer world without the filter of a self-centered speaker, much like Wallace Stevens’ Snowman. While those poems are not present in the work in its current presentation, I think that they are an important trajectory to be noted while reading these poems. The destruction of ego-centric thought is no small matter. Buddhism has been working on the problem for a few thousand years now. I’m not sure that these poems reach that goal by the time the last line of Epilogue closes. The fact that the poet is left at the end of the last poem still resides within the mind of the speaker may betray the poems intention, even if he is attempting in that moment the escape he has been building towards.

On Physical Space in the Poems

A conscious effort was made in many of these poems, especially in the later entries, to be geographically placed. Much of the earlier work is obtuse about time and

place. "Praxis Mundi" for example, is a poem that exists wholly in the reflection of events and attitudes, which leaves the reader in an nebulous position to the text. Without place and time the poem seems to lose itself. "Praxis Mundi" is structured like as a listing poem, in the tradition of "Song of Myself" and "Howl". The initial strength of that poetic form that were to be harnessed in "Praxis Mundi" involved the building of energy through repetition and the expansive, all inclusive nature of the extended line. Upon revision and contemplation, however, it became clear that one of the greater strengths of poems like "Howl", and very much "Song of Myself", lies in their placement of the reader in specific moments in place and time. Revisions were made to the poem that reflected the need for this strengthening. The end of the poem, for instance, leaves the readers on the edge of a Lake Erie at night. If the poem lies mostly in the mind of the speaker, it at least leaves the reader somewhere specific.

Lake Erie, often simply referred to as "the lake" in the poems, actually becomes a theme in the poems through the collection. Just as Frank O'Hara's poems were almost always about New York City, and Frost's poems about New England, these poems seemed to migrate back to the same lake, which is obviously biographically important for the poet. It is important to note that throughout the poems in this collection that the significance of the lake is not its "natural" aspects. What could be the setting for poems about nature are more about social meeting grounds. In "Recursive Exodus" and "Bottlerocket" the lake is a place of secret gathering. Both poems reference the exclusive nature of the company that is kept in the meeting places. The lake is objectified, then. It becomes a status symbol or a perhaps a secret possession. For the poet the landscape is more an aspect of his personal history than one of objective geography, which is the idea

discussed in “Reading Aloud”, in which the Poet tries to recreate scenes from books only to realize that his personification of a books theme leaves his imprint on it rather than the book leaving some new awareness with him.

The poems move geographically as well. Many of the earlier poems are set in a frame of memory and are set in rural landscapes, most noticeably Lake Erie. As the poet moves from the dis-covering of his past to the dis-covering of his present self, the landscape matures into city settings.

On Language use

My intent with the language in these poems is to avoid an overly didactic tone. The poets who write poems that openly flaunt their “point” often sound, to me, like they are proud to the point of arrogance with whatever kernel of knowledge they are written to impart. What this should instead read as is a personal sharing of histories. A large number of these poems are written in the tone of a story told between friends over a drink or at a small gathering. “Tutoring”, for example, lends itself to being read without the formal pose of “Reading Poetry”, which I think to some (even in academic communities) still holds a connotation of men with frilly collars holding up skulls and pontificating. I hesitate to quote Billy Collins, but I read a comment of his that has informed my style. He said that poetry should be hospitable to the reader. Interpret that as meaning not that a poem should be simple. Simple poems would just be dull. I think instead that a poem’s worth should lie in complete and interesting ideas rather than in its formatting or in gimmicks. By gimmicks I do not mean to imply that a poem with musical language or complex and rigid form is immediately without merit, but in my writing it would only be

a crutch to lean my ideas upon. The “music” of my phrases for the majority of these poems is in the language of friends speaking to friends, which is a music I think needs to be expressed more often than the verbose soliloquy.

Of course there are exceptions. “Praxis Mundi” obviously uses an intended form, and a few of the poems do stray away from the conversational into more abstract language. “Adieu, Mon Beard” and “Casual-ty” sound less like actual speech, and are really anomalies in this set of poems, to my eyes. I include them for two reasons. The first is that they add to the theme of a shifting “self”, the former for its shifting view of masculinity and the latter for the displayed effect of the outside world upon people. The second reason I include them in set is for the variety they bring. If the entire set of poems sounded exactly the same I think perhaps it would be much like a person speaking in monotone for 30 pages, which I wished to avoid at all costs. A voice should be a dynamic thing, in my opinion. There is great value in being recognizable, for sure. A well read person can more than likely pick a Robert Frost poem out of a crowd just by reading a stanza or two and that level of recognition is undeniably attractive to almost any poet. I feel, though, that the inclusion of contradiction provides something human to the structure of this set of poems. This is the first “set” of poems that I have ever created. The original intent of the project was that each poem would be an unnamed chapter to the “book”. William Carlos Williams’ *Kora in Hell* inspired me in its construction. Williams has said that he started it with no book in mind, but simply wrote a daily poem, whether he felt inspiration or not. What resulted was a set of poems connected only by the fact that they flowed sequentially from the same mind. You could, if you wanted to, try to plot arcs in his thought. You could, over the time, see the personality of the man behind

the typewriter. I attempted to recreate that “portal” in these poems. Many of them were written from a sentence or a fragment written in passing in a journal that I returned to, or came to me in parts while doing the mundane actions of my day, so I feel that the line of thought can be followed in much the same way. That I also attempted to create a slightly polished version of speech into the poems hopefully adds to the idea of a mind in motion in the process of self discovery. The hope is that following the lines of thought and discovery serve to remind readers about their own moments of self discovery or denial. It is my firm belief that most people already know their own weaknesses and strength at some level. This set of poem is a process of reminding, and hopefully starts that process for its readers. When the speaker works out feelings of inadequacy or arrogance or mortality, the hope is that the end of each poem will spark an “Oh yeah, me too” moment for the reader. When the effect works as it is supposed to, the realization is less the product of a pointed didactic finger from the poem than it is a feeling of self-realization for the person reading.

Praxis Mundi

Before we had tax forms,
before rent notices,
before the ever emptying gas gauges of our dilapidated cars became ever immediate concerns,
I and the people that were the better parts of me grew unchecked by concern, stood tall for it like sequoias over the foliage of our peers without doubt,
leaning into our movements and laughing goofily at our small achievements,
We were pups playing coyote, howling at the mid-Atlantic moon, shuddering at the sound of our own yelps,
Were the lesser deities of our own broken pantheon, erecting statues of ourselves in slant rhyme on pages that we hid or burned, sacrifices to our own created glories,
were hummingbirds that never learned to fly, so we ran our mouths instead,
vibrations from the sputtering soothed us as we ran around, flower to flower,
saying the world in run on sentences,
were sad mouthed minaret climbers of the American night screaming dreams out over the dark waters of Great Lakes. We cupped our mouths, as if Canadians might hear us and shout back,
were cut by edges of our own egg shells, the scars of which showing fresh and red as we crowed to the coming light?, shamelessly shaking our wattles at passersby,
were Roman in our bravado, as sure as Romans, as hedonistic as, as hungry as, and just as unaware of how thinly we were stretched,
were hiding insecurities in all of this, for sure, chatter-boxing our plans for the future to camouflage the gut punching actuality
were the over reaching anything rocks thinking we were keystones, thinking we were place holders, thinking we were keys to some bigger structure,
were so far from the center that we couldn't even see it in the distance and thought it must be us,
were inclusive and reclusive and elitist and foolish but were in love with everyone else because they weren't us, because, self separated, we could see all the beauty and ugly, all that the better and worse that made them scary to us like curved mirrors distorting the proportions,
were hoarse from carrying on, throats raw, still praising ourselves for what we thought was special, what made us Spartacus, though we would more than likely share the anonymity he enjoyed in his end,
were angry for not feeling comfortable taking a place in any part of that great shifting amoeba,
in the swarms of back seat daydreamers who sat with oversized hearts, for sure, but heads and eyes fogged over with biologic lust,
in the capillary scholar system, carrying the iron of society to its varying extremities while we only wanted to bleed out of the skin and go in any direction out of our own vain ways.
in the parties with the mindless drunks, falling over each other twisting limbs and sweaty tongues inside of fogged window houses as we made obscene snow sculptures in their lawns

in the normal flow of school-job-ground that seemed to please everyone else around us
while we sat itching at our sleeves to leave,
in anything, really, that had been done at least ten times before but we couldn't find a
purchase onto the new,
couldn't find a dirt road that didn't lead to pavement, though we looked for hours in
cornfield expanses,
couldn't find a beach that didn't have the charred aftermath of a driftwood fire that we
missed out on,
couldn't find a new danger to face, a new thrill that wasn't set on rails,
couldn't earn the life we were wasting every aching moment and knew it and despite that
kept doing the same things over and again, saying they were adventures when we
were really just moving in our own old footsteps that were really the footsteps
of some other kids who were tracking themselves,
couldn't see God, even though we kept saying that he was right there in every part of
every thing,
couldn't escape His old symbols and his old house even when we insisted that they were
never really His,
couldn't get passed the cold hard feeling that realization left us with as we walked along
the shoreline back to our cars in the quiet dark, watching our footing so we didn't
roll our ankles on a stray stone or dead fish (which was god too),
couldn't find a way to express this terrible urging to anyone else without turning into
grotesque forms of ourselves, over the top self parodies to prove a point that was
slightly hyperbolic to begin with,
couldn't find the right phrasing to say that all we wanted was for once to be able to
claim our own authenticity,
to fight new dragons who didn't breathe fire but sashimi or grass clippings or
subjunctive clauses from their hostile nostrils,
to write the words that make one person cry and another person squirm and another
person raise an eyebrow in confusion,
to speak those words to everyone ever born, to break the rail ride and let them all scatter
like broken necklace beads
to breathe in air that wasn't a composite mix of dead everything-before-us that
decomposed,
to breathe bigger, to hurt our lungs with the breathing like bullfrog chests, inverted
horns of plenty that took in all of that great gaseous newness,
to cut out,
to praise our own fake escape,
to fear being left out,
to creep on rabbit feet back into parents' houses
to make our own flaws become our greatest boons,
our soft hands,
our averted eyes,
our monster hopes,
our cracked voices,
our self imposed angst,
our inability to fit *them* so we had better fool them into trying to fit *us*,

our inability to pull it off as we were pulled apart by
our hypocrisy,
our anxiety,
our aching need for a lack of difference anymore,
our inevitable descent from the false heights we had lied ourselves onto,
our fall into the cliché bottle,
our fall into roach clip mornings,
our fall into empty conversations,
empty books,
empty apartments,,
empty careers,
empty driving home,
empty silences,
empty, all, not because they lacked substance but because they lacked that naïve hope
that kept us out looking at three in the morning to the indistinct moment where
the black waves struggled against the spilled ink sky. Struggling atmospheres
fighting the seam that, like skin, denied them the release of embrace.

His Idle Moment.

In muffled silence
the light climbs
up waving like seaweed
between his toes. It grows

from the cold on
his foot soles that
just breach the surface.
He stays still save for

the slight waving of his hand
To keep him down-right
and the slow crescent sweeps
of hair with the current.

Flipped against the surface, the sky
looms below him,
A bright blue-green
abyss. In its depths,

movement and noise
that he hates
and heat that he hates,
and cold that he hates.

There are monsters in the deep.
In the shallows, though, there is only
the warm sand ceiling
and the moving current.

Recursive Exodus

To walk without a light
down to the beach in the dark
or through the woods
was a point of pride
or worth, perhaps,
to young men from my town.
To use the moon for what it was,
to be confident in your step
was a requirement if you were
to see how the stars changed
the black lake, or the grass,
which was dark blue by
their interstellar tutelage,
or to see the way that each other looked,
turned pale, eyes made large.
to see how they moved without sight
towards some common goal
over the next breaker
or around the next bend, farther
into the deep blue, away from
the orange light
pollution of the city.

The Bottle Rocket.

Fireworks, if they are worth their weight in sparks, do not go out when they hit the water.
The burn on, wet, until they've had their fill

The bottle rocket still sputters and burns and barrels on into the great dark lake, Still boils
up bubbles to the surface,
still holds the faces on the shore:

The three grinning fools huddle around its launch pad, fingers singed from matches and
wicks,

the assortment of girls on blankets around the campfire in the sand.

The Fire tender halted to watch with an armload of logs from the tree line,
the mallow fingered cook, whose transfixed eyes are going to let that smore burn,
they all stare at the still water, and the white sizzling breaks on the surface.

They hear it more than they see it. The rocket is gone, probably forever, But they know it
by its wake.

The Peanut Gallery start to talk again about their cars or their troubles
the fire-tender lays the logs gentle as babies into the fire and watches to be sure that they
smoke and begin to light. He stokes them lovingly and loses himself in silence.
The idiot cook starts a new smore, smiling bashfully as he rubs his overheated knuckles

But the three, the fools, are still, and look out to the point where the bubbles had
stopped.

There is silence there, but the rocket is still hot, down in the waves, and they've more to
send.

The night-lake is a map unexplored and unmarked save for a burn on its edge.

The fools set again, unfurl another wick, and with its light renew the anticipation of their
escape.

The Axe Slab

The trick was to cut
a clean slab, long and wide enough to be solid.
With enough room on the edges
to see the water rolling black underneath

the violence of it would turn the ice white
with cracks, like an iced cube,
the first time I ran the length
I felt the death adrenaline.

The wet cold hand that would take me under
the wall that would keep me down
the slab that would be too heavy to lift
and the cold still fish.

The first time I ran the length
I heard the fellows cheer
and the snow pack .
The slab buckled,

the I was off and done.
It bobbed oafishly
In the water like a toddler
with a floatie-belt.

I rubbed my nose with my hand,
took my place on the far end
and puff my breath like cigar smoke
at the idiots who feared the wet.

Passed the cemetery, down
the hill to the old gravel quarry,
We passed
winter nights with an axe and ice.

A Night Game.

I would look out and see eyes,
bloated, death-white eyes

and a jackal-hair mouth, and a grin
like I was the butt-end of a cracked joke
for a horrible peek-a-boo monster.

It took up the window- the whole window! –
save for a sliver in which the moon

would illuminate the fel silhouette.
My hand over the edge of the bed
hung inches from mouths. There was cold

breath on my wrist. The air shifted,
herald of grey-black molars

and barbed wire whiskers.
Until I was twelve he kept my up at night,
most nights. Now at 23, I don't see him,

the monster in the moonlight.
I don't fear teeth and horns.

I've left real monsters in my wake
that scramble home in the dark
with dull, small eyes, a familiar beard,

and gaps in their grimaces as they look in.
Backlit by orange streetlamps

they act out small but accumulated cruelties,
looking back apishly through the window-

and I approve, and they continue-

The jackal hair boys, moving in the submarine light
and the proud father hiding behind the glass.

Just One Reason

Behind the wall behind my bed,
a drip-
drip in the wall.
drip,
and in my head drip as well
I can't tell if my neighbor knows,
laughs, and turns
it just so, So that it runs
steady fast at one
moment and I think
maybe it will turn
into a stream
that I can block out - maybe
get to sleep without counting
those drops like so many sheep.
Maybe he sits there until
three in the morning,
Some five feet away, an evangelist
of insomnia. He spreads
his ailment like fallen water
spreads over the bottom of a sink
and then reforms it into a bead
which is at the back of my brain at four.
It lays there and gains weight
with water and then just around five
it falls through,
If I am lucky, and I fall just slightly,
just momentarily, asleep.

Falling Asleep to Annie Hall

Woody Allen doesn't sing lullabies.
At least, not that I've heard, and certainly
I've been listening. So perhaps I made a bad choice
perhaps the warm milk I'm using to medicate
myself has made me delirious.
But in my head Annie Hall is calm, is warm,
is nostalgic like the memory of a good nights' sleep:
safety, comfort, a young Carol Kane.
he starts: facing the camera.
he starts with nervous eyes. I continue-
this is a ridiculous choice.
I should fall asleep to demolition man,
to Independence day, to god damned Jurassic park
for all the help his voice is giving.

But there is a rhythm. It is lilting. *He* is lilting.
She is grating, but she moves with him, vocally.
I don't even watch- I stare at the ceiling. The voices
and the light dance together. They play tennis.
They cook lobster. And a car drives by out my window.
Finally I fall asleep as she leaves for California.

I wake up morose, like I've lost something,
wondering if it isn't because I left them
before the recovery. It stays with me all day. The loneliness,
the desperation for recovery.

Its like the old joke:
"If you're choking on an ice cube
All you need to do is swallow a gallon of boiling water."

No Beat Angel.

Empty conduits,
green and brown
glass and clear
large ones, and there
at the lip: I look
sad-eyed to
the poured shot that
waits for me.

Four in the morning
I wish I were done, tonight
with scotch. And yet
and yet. And yet. Come five-thirty
we will go out to the waterfall
drop. We will
meditate on the morning air,
on the hill that overlooks
the city.

We will throw stones
at beauty, Jack, and laugh
at our ugly hands, tattooed Avolokitesvara
across our knuckles, awkward.

We will undo history.
To be alone in our pasts
we will redo
with courage. words
we've said a million times before,
fast brained written,
no thought
in the night with klaxons
and angels
on fire.

Re-entry

The sun finds the face, hidden
between pillows and arms.
The el train slams his brain apart. It remolds
like oil on wax paper, the light
seeps into it.
Hide the eyes!
The brain pounds. The hang-
over droops low like
a vulture over a branch. Its neck
dips to him, its beak has teeth.
Head smothers into the couch.

The el train goes by. Fifteen minutes!
It is a vessel for relativity-
it takes moments to arrive, now
when his head pounds
but when he waits, then,
when he waits it takes half a day
for the train. The vulture dips

beak deep into his skull
and recedes. He feels the hole. It rises,
fills in like dough. The pain materializes then.
In the eyes. He puts pressure
the on temples, pushes hard against the skin,
against the dough. It works,
the pain wriggles from his hands
to the crown of his head
and sits triumphant.

The el goes by -time continues,
fifteen minutes of pain. He holds
his crown, blood pumps, pressured to his palms
and fights it there. The vulture,
enraged at the loss of its easy meal flies again
to the base, where the skull
and neck connect.

Silence, pain, and then the train again.
No use for it, the body cannot hold against.
He moves along the line
on the floor to the sink
and the pills and the one. two. three.
four pills and the water.

Now shower and the water on the neck,
The hot press of the water on the back of the neck
and the skull is released.
the train rumbles along.
The morning dies, fodder
to the vulture who gets his meal
all the same. The hangover leaves. He
moves for his shoes,
braces his head again for movement,
and off to the train.

The Upside of the El Train

The upside of the el train,
moving fast
and exposed,
is that you can see
the whole city as you
pass by.

The downside
is that the whole city,
on a Saturday morning,
has to hear you
clacking and ogling along
at eight in the damned
morning while they
are trying to sleep off
two six packs and
4 a.m. burritos.

The tracks
and the people
groan under its weight
as it flies,
exposed and fast
into the city.

Casualty

For the neighborhood by the hospital
the ambulances coming in
cut their sirens and lights:
a mercy for their ears and children.
But the silence cuts a symbol
and the quiet man at his window
can't distinguish what's inside,
that terrible white thing.
Is he watching the end of a life,
or the end of a lunch break?
Do ambulances go anywhere
without carrion return?

That severing, the absence
of sound, the lack of indicator
bleeds the man in the window.
White blood cells down the road
and to the left, silent. Until
the infection is fought
and the man doesn't stand at the window anymore.

In a Food Court

In New Jersey
eating a sandwich,
no meat,
with a coke,
no ice,

I was thinking

about Paul Bove's devine discussion of Heidegger's notion of alatheia as truth, that all is
neither purely subjective nor objective, but a mutual dis-cover-ing and the re-cover-ing of
fact in the text, like digging a hole in loose sand, when

a little boy

in the next booth,

looked up, angrily at a sign and said,

burning with pride at his newfound ability to spell,

"momma that sign says Master Wok but that isn't how you spell walk. Do they know that
they spelled it wrong?"

He looked to his mother, right arm pointing
with self-righteousness at the sign.

I looked at the sign

and I looked at the boy

I looked at myself.

then I put Bove aside and

thought instead about

buying a milkshake for dessert.

Tutoring

“Good writing,” I said, “is
like good architecture.
The sturdiest structures
are the least ornate. The

arch, for instance
is the strongest structure,
and is one solid piece.
That is how your sentences
should be.”

A light went off.

The student left, and then
I rewrote every poem
that I'd ever written.

Adieu, Mon Beard

If the beard is a statement,
if absence is a presence.
if scrape
the slough.

If the beard is a statement then it is
too much. If I am my accessories
then I am too little. To scrape.
If to cut could balance. If I am a lamb,
my month's wool, my beard a lunar cycle.
The breaking and
release of

If I live in a cycle. If I scrape.
I am the moon, then. If my face is uterine
in movement, the statement is an egg. The slough. The scrape
if the egg is too much.
I am cut.

If I am a lamb and the egg hatches
in spring. My baby-face, if scraped, is absent
presence of the statement.
If balance is a blade
to cut
away.

Reading Aloud

I read Moby Dick Aloud on a beach,
to be honest it was not the entire poem,
Melville does go on,
but enough to experience it,
as I mouthed Ahab's insane soliloquies,
viscerally. The wind was blowing cold,
as it does in October in Pennsylvania,
I talked through my scarf, and shifted
from one hand to the other with my book.
It gave me an idea.

I read Thoreau again
in the woods, next to water.
And I heard birds move,
as he did I felt myself as part of
rather than adjacent to.
I felt too hot in the sun and he talked about economics,
Thoreau does go *on*,
and I talked about them as well.
When I said that most men lived quiet lives of desperation,
I said it goofily quiet, and then once again louder,
more self-consciously.

I read Cormac Mearthy last,
alone. I read him in winter,
with only one light on,
and that was as close as I dared to go.
I read Keruoac in a train station, looking crazy,
I read Hesse on my hardwood floor
I read Murakami on a train through the night

These metaphors became meaningful,
The game I played was fun,
But it became a filter for the writing.
My Lake became Ahab's tomb,
my woods became Walden pond,
my train a bullet train,
and then there was no other ocean,
no other woods,
not trains that when nowhere, save that one to Buffalo.
So I removed them again, my biography
from the books' geography.
I let them be, and read
Tolkien on my couch.

My Version of Nobility.

I used to pass my time at night
walking the golf course next to my apartment, thinking
of pastoral England.

I would sit by the 11th, under this
large Maple and twill the leaves over my head,
to watch what the moonlight
would do if lead through an
organic conduit. I wrote poems
to princesses in the sand
traps, mimed polo on the greens.

Always without agenda, I would ramble
through the midnight kingdom with only my head
and maybe a cigar that I bought
for less than a dollar at a gas station.

I only saw someone else once,
and far away. He was someone else
like me, I think. I could tell
because he held his chin high,
and looked about with swagger, and processed
forward with his arms held in lordly fashion.
He saw me and bowed
his head just so from across the 10th hole water trap,
that I could only return the greeting
and dispatch my imaginary armada to his shores.

The Moment I Realized that I like Ezra Pound

The girl
next to me asked why
I was flush, reading Mauberley
silently at a sterile table.
She couldn't care about the arrogant fascist,
or his impenetrable insistence
with forced antiquity.
And at first I agreed.
Here is what struck me:

The jerk, for three sections had droned
about his detachment from an inferior society,
a boorish half-savage age,
and then stumbled. Showed for a moment
humanity. The world, all plaster, all economy,
gave up its sons in 1914 in this way:

*"Daring as never before,
wastage as never before,
Fortitude as never before."*

My thought: if someone so vain, so removed,
whose every breath seems to rhyme
with contempt, can feel compassion, maybe pride,
perhaps even a moment of sincere admiration
despite his ego,

maybe there's hope for me.

A Misplaced Cog

I took the back road to my apartment in the spring
from classes over the hill,
through a suburb with high fences on both sides,
Ten feet high or I'm a liar.
Each with thick green trees in lines behind them
to hide the insides from the
slits between the wood.
One was a tennis court,
I could hear the racquets connect.
The rest were mysteries that I could play in:
secret swing sets for wealthy pre-teens,
hidden zoos for the elite eccentrics,
lemon tree orchards, maybe.
The only house on the stretch
that left itself open, was the real reason
I went, in the spring. Fifty different kinds of flower and bush,
fifty or I'm a filthy liar,
Paths led through them all swarming with bussing insects.
And always in those afternoons in the spring,
a classically beautiful middle aged Indian woman,
Bindi and all,
lending lightly or leading a friend.
Every day she looked
up from her plants
and smile at me. Me, as if I fit
into her world, not just some kid
with a goodwill shirt
and a journalism textbook.

Apartment Shopping.

Searching for a new neighborhood
in a city you will move to
quickly begins to resemble
testing fruit at a market stand.

You begin to act like you've been in
good produce all your life,
an expert who can weed out a hint of brown on a leaf-
"Pilsen is nice, I guess. Just don't go into *west* Pilsen,
or at least not after sundown."-
or the spot where a worm once
dug a delicious hole
through skin.

"Wicker park has that good book store,
but it's crowded with hipster kids
and the you know what that can be like"
So close, but a bruise by the stem,
so it goes back.

Those good shopping
instincts become arrogant
pretention. You look from shelf to shelf
like a British queen at her vassals,
and you know it.

"China town would be nice,
but it's so far south. And there's
the language barrier." Every time you go
to the market you
eyeball the lychee,
mull over trying something new,

but end up with the sealed plastic container
of strawberries which have been placed
for convenience next to an iced rack of whipped cream.
"Well yeah Lincoln Park is pretty great.
The prices are a little high, but the *neighborhood*
is perfect. It's safe, and you'll *love* the people there."

Impressionist One Night Stand

My dreams
of liquorish mushrooms
and bog fish gloom strands
dance jerkily. I'm left
doing the calculus of those
dyads, Left-right,
and in the center,
that nefarious dangle.

Hoods drawn and donned,
mischievous fairies and scorpions sting
-a scarved gypsy dance-
 writhe and pull,
broken flickered
side-shot glance that walled
man away from, and apart
from the gyre, the thrust.
the loss of .

A portable tea cup
caffeine dissolved and embraced
until Park bench
 ear drum ruptures-
duct tape tears
 at hair, exposed-
and all for that
simple pleasure seen when
the white gleaming
tower of Babel in a night, cold
outside of a warm party,
the form erected
 in god's penumbral
shadow, stands in
the naked defiance
of words.

What I'd rather do.

Well firstly, nothing.
Nothing at all. Like a stone.
or a book
better as

a book, full of old letters
and a cover and a name,
but still
but quiet

Perhaps cook some meal,
look slowly across a pot
as water bubbles
and noodles soften.

Or I could tattoo vulgarity
onto my cheekbones
still better than
the alternative.

Maybe sew a fine hat
from my own thinning hair
which I will pluck
individually

and thread through a needle
made from my molar root-
I will need your help
It's in pretty deep-

Of course I could just watch the news
while I eat that meal I made,
read a book,
mimic stone.

“Haha. Ok, Time.”

A viscerally awkward moment
that I share whenever the topic of time
comes up in conversation:

The grimaces of two dozen faces,
as I told a classroom
of nineteen-year-olds
that they were all
inevitably going to die.
The moment when
I saw them change, silently,
from Glazed boredom,
to abject fear
to utter hatred
except for two in the back
-Smirking, invincible-
and one, middle-left,
who nodded,
smiling.

Portrait of My Present Absence

I shed

paper mostly, and skin.

There will be reams
in my wake.

When I am gone
the trace will be

a discarded wrapper
words that I left

the coffee stain on my desk

that won't rub off
even with chemical.

The handle to my desk drawer
that I broke with my knee,

The pinecone I threw
behind the bookshelf
and the secret knock

I made for lunchtime
which they use now,
without my memory.

Epilogue

I.

Few moments like
the summer nighttime shoreline
at one of America's great lakes:
Warm air and water

In the Erie dark.
Ghosts of pre-American Americans.
Ghosts of old submerged ships.
the ghost of a frontier.

Light pollution
southeastwest,
and no way to go
farther into the dark line north.

II.

We played a game.
We pretended at risk
at the break of Pennsylvania night.
we'd pick one of the directions left,
south east west
and drive without direction.

Stayed off paved roads,
misguided thought that
to be on something old
was to be lost.

Two hours later,
halfway through the state
and we always stumbled
upon an easy highway
pointing home.

III.

Down the old Gudgeonville hill
Twisting steep and left
The road stopped, a covered bridge
Made before my father

Darkly stood, a ghost house
Of ancient red wood,
Over nothing for thirty feet
And then rocks and water.

lit from the east end
by our brights, we each crossed
alone and on foot
like an exile across a border

Sweating, I crossed in my due
And through the bridge the world
Dropped and changed until
Getting to the end

it returned in full
and the old wood gave way
to the concrete and of course
the way back up the hill.

Interlude

Roughly one in-the-morning
rough back road,
south-east of Crawford county,
came across a coyote.

Cut the engine and lights.
waiting for this wild thing,
standing in the middle of the road
dumbly, to do anything.

It walked slow and calm
up to the car, to the front and then
to the passenger side.
It glanced at me through glass
like looking into a zoo cage.

as the car started back up
the dog faded into the redblueblack
as we pushed forward
into our self imposed glare.

IV.

The map of my world is complete.

Lines drawn by long dead hands
retraced by the ink trail
of an old Buick in the dark.

With no north to go
And without hope
For SouthEastWest.
I pointed the eye-piece inward.

Found the same desolation
of hope for exploration.
Everything paved out.
The wrinkles made smooth

By pop culture sign posts
That prevent me from ever getting lost
In thought. This map was finished, too,
Long ago and without my knowledge.

Whole dark expanses
Wet, electric, and primal
Were illuminated without my consent.
Spotlights on the billboards.

V.
If the mind is a map,
Then it can be escaped.
The world doesn't share
The edges of the paper

If the map is for movement
If the ease of the conduit
Was creased into the grey,
In the shape of an eight,

Then it can be evaded around
By a separate navigator
With headlights to the front,
Pointed edge-ward.

In defiance of the dead
With reluctance to its own living
The old car detours
to dirt roads.