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Gongshi Meditation on the American Prairie

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GONGSHI MEDITATION ON THE AMERICAN PRAIRIE

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Brandon Henry

May 2018

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GONGSHI MEDITATION ON THE AMERICAN PRAIRIE

English

Missouri State University, May 2018

Master of Arts

Brandon Henry

ABSTRACT

The following collection deals largely with autobiographical work. Created primarily between 2007-2018, the following poems reflect the life experiences and reflections of a poet throughout his thirties. Largely tied to regionalism of the Ozarks, many poems in this collection highlight specific locales throughout southwest Missouri and/or northern Arkansas, and explore, thematically, feelings of loneliness, isolation, the struggle of faith, and the impact of displacement, both physical and metaphysical. Further, many of the poems feature a through-line, thematically, involving the bonds of family and the impact of death on relationships and the human psyche. Lastly, an appreciation for, and connection with, nature frames much of the collection. Stylistically, the following poems show influence from the Deep Image style and the New York School, and often highlight a degree of formalism in the vein of Donald Justice. Taken as a whole, it is the intent of the author to present, within *Gongshi Meditation on the American Prairie*, a tableau of America in the present age, told through autobiographical experience of a searcher, and the America that exists in nature, metaphysics, and the experiences of life long gone and forgotten.

KEYWORDS: regionalism, deep image, displacement, location, family, supernatural, death, Christianity, travel, American identity

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Marcus Cafagña
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

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Approved:

Marcus Cafagña, MFA

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been lucky to be a part of something special in my graduate studies at Missouri State University. I want to thank both Marcus Cafagña, MFA, and Sara Burge, MFA, for their gracious support, encouragement, and the contribution of their time, not only in the preparation of this thesis, but also in writing workshops and personal correspondence. I will always value your opinions and guidance. I wish also to thank Dr. Shannon Wooden, who taught me better to look at the world through a critical eye. I have gained valuable perspective under your tutelage. I would like to thank my parents, for being great enablers. Through your help and support, I have avoided a lot of hardship. Thank you to Alex Webster, who kept an open ear for me. I appreciate your friendship and ongoing thoughts on writing. Thank you to Michael Burns, whose knowledge and guidance was formative on my writing at a time when I was just beginning. I learned long and valuable lessons under your scope. Finally, I would like to thank both Nicole Denise and my brother, Adam Henry, who both were instrumental in giving me the confidence to move forward with my poetry. Without their feedback and encouragement, I would not be here today, writing this thesis. And to all the other friends and colleagues who have lent support and guidance along the way, I close with a quote from Robert Graves: “I don’t really feel my poems are mine at all. I didn’t create them out of nothing. I owe them to my relations with other people.”

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LOOKING BACK AT A TRAILHEAD

At the trailhead of Grand Prairie State Park, a protected wildlife area of tallgrass prairie near Mindenmines, Missouri, there is a weathered old logbook. The tome rests in a rustic, dark-colored and roughly-cut wooden box, mounted on a large signpost, which is itself secured to the ground by an old timber from the park's opening in 1980, two years after I was born. The logbook is thus sheltered from the elements, the angular cut of the signpost reaching south against the sunlight looming over the waving grasses and evoking a shadow from the observation tower, creaking in the Summer silence. The logbook itself is rather unremarkable, a canvas-bound sheaf of yellow paper, each page lined and headed with words indicating name, time, make/model of vehicle (and license plate), and date of embarkation. The purpose of the logbook is to keep record of those hikers venturing out on the trails and the ledger is monitored by a ranger assigned to the park, whose closing duties include a reconciliation of the hikers currently out on the prairie. Before closing the park each night, the ranger reviews the list and determines who, at any given time, is still out in the wilds.

I've seen similar logbooks at other parks across the country, and in Canada, and, as a younger man, I scrawled my name in them. Reflecting on those log books, and the trailheads of their haunt, I spin some on the thought of my journey as a writer – a trip that is in some ways still beginning. I think about the names in those disparate journals, each representing another out wandering the wilderness, searching, and exploring. I think about the items I've taken with me, from the start, and the provisions I've borrowed along the way, like stores in communal hunting lodges during the pioneer days, lying

dormant in the snows on the dark side of mountains, waiting for someone's arrival. I also think some about purpose, the 'where and why' of it all – the journey of this writing thing – why I am doing this.

As a writer, and concerning this 'life as a journey' metaphor I am starting to unroll, the things I have taken with me involve the idea of formative influence, so I might as well start at the beginning. I was born on a farm in the small town of Ashland, MO, which is near Columbia, home of the University of Missouri's School Of Medicine. In my early years, I spent my days mostly with animals, and ran barefoot through the farm grounds alongside my brother, Brian. My father was in medical school at the time, and he and my mother rented a small cottage from an elderly farmer and his wife. It was, looking back on it, a bucolic and rich experience, but also a very isolated one. In those days on the farm, surrounded by chickens and horses, the kernel of my belief system was formed. Like tendons that slowly ossify in fowl over time, my connection to nature solidified into a bezoar stone that I carry inside me.

Growing up, nature and naturalism fascinated me. My comic books, my baseball cards, were wildlife field guides about reptiles, amphibians, trees, flowers, and rocks. At any given time, in the dark on the top bunk, I had some wild thing living with me, some creature I had caught in my exploring. I was a benevolent captor, only keeping each resident for a season or so, but I remember them all. As a child, I had pet tree frogs, giant stag beetles, aquatic cave salamanders that are now near-extinct, even alligator snapping turtles, which is another story altogether. As a young child, unbelievably, I could catch a bird flying, and I could run down and capture wild rabbits. (There is a technique to rabbit behavior, but again, this phenomenon elicits other stories). Even

today, I still carry this fascination with nature and the idea of its capture and control. Last summer, for example, I caught a black-widow spider and kept it in a jar for ten days. In my writing, this connection to nature is a central theme, coloring much of my imagery and subject matter, and it is a theme within which I feel most comfortable and enabled. Within this collection, the poem “The Glass Lizard” explores this facet of my ethos, and the poems “New Ashland Chickens,” “On Seeing the Albino Koi at Fellows Lake,” and “Glade Top – Elephant Rocks” all deal with a spiritual connection to nature, as does the poem “Factory Farm Smokestacks over Noel, MO.” Looking through the lens of psychology, in my rather privileged vantage of old hindsight, I can see now the motivation as that of a young person searching for friendship, a pit I am still fighting my way out of, another facet of my prism: loneliness.

Twinning the importance of naturalism in my life and writing, I carry with me a sense of place. In my life, I have been lucky enough to travel throughout most of America and I spent about seven years wandering, earning a scant living selling rocks on Ebay, while writing, exploring the wilderness, and avoiding the regrettable, inevitable end of adult childhood. I have camped throughout the Southwest, been throughout New England to the tip of Maine, and spent time in New York City. I have lived in the Rockies and hiked in British Columbia. I have visited every southern state and I have seen the Great Lakes. Lastly, I have traveled Route 66 from Los Angeles to Springfield, a formative trip that I spent with my brother Adam, in a time when he was searching and reflecting, himself a sojourner.

The idea of place features prominently in much of my poetry, and I have a penchant for writing during times of travel, creating a logbook, of sorts, that I hope

embodies something of the locales in which my poems were created. In particular, the poems “Covalence Lake Michigan,” “Precision in Identification of Fungi as Soil Stabilizers,” “Pentecostal Revival Child,” and “Recording Eastport,” were all created during times of travel, and were written largely in the moment of visiting places foreign and reflecting on the ideas that color and shade their contours. Additionally, the idea of travel and of place feature prominently in many poems that, for want of a manageable length, were omitted from this thesis.

It is my hope that the poems in this thesis, taken as a collective whole, will represent, as a tableau, not only glimpses into real places in America, such as the trails of the Grand Prairie, and places, like the prairie of antiquity, long ago lost or transformed, but also the state of being an individual experiencing these places. This is the more ethereal view of place, the embodiment of it in the mind, the place of Williams’ *Paterson* and Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*. As Robert Creeley stated back in 1961: “The local is not a place but a place in a given man – what part of it he has been compelled or else brought by love to give witness to in his own mind. And that is the form, that is, as whole as it can get” (Creeley 34).

In terms of ‘the things I carried,’ to borrow phrasing from Tim O’Brien, I bring with me a disparate set of psychological and philosophical provisions, perhaps more than necessitate mention. The importance of family and friendship runs throughout much of my poetry, and often is colored through the lens of loss and tragedy, as well as a nostalgia for times past. The poems “Snow Piss Names,” “Wanderlust Friends,” and “Festival Campfires” involve the sadness for lost times in the life of family and friendships, whereas “Thermal Vision Sapient,” “Trading Places,” and “Recording

Eastport” deal with the struggle to reconcile untimely deaths of those close to me. The first and the last poem involve the death of my close friend, who died from exposure to chemical weapons during the Gulf War, a loss that has impacted me to this day. The second poem, “Trading Places,” involves an institutional bond trader named Alfredo, another friend who was killed, along with many others at the firm Cantor Fitzgerald, in the collapse of One World Trade Center. His death has been a quiet haunt and something I am still unraveling.

Indeed, the mystery of death and the struggle to reconcile life in its long shadow is something I’ve carried, something that I find myself adding to on this journey. During my critical analysis, I examined my portfolio of work, which involves around two-hundred poems, and found that contemplation of death was a running thread throughout dozens of them. In this collection, the poem “Firewall Lights,” in particular, highlights the intersection of life and death, as do the poems “Hilltopping Kids,” “Mir,” and “On Traveling 60-miles with a Dragonfly.”

To a lesser extent, concerning the poems included in this thesis, the theme of failed relationships runs through my poetry. The poems “Her Smiling,” “Sunlight Shining Through a Map Unfolding Maries County, MO,” “The Perseid Meteors,” and “Backside View of a Brunette Mirage Pixelating into Ditmars” deal with yearning and loss from the ending of romantic relationships.

A fascination with the supernatural is also a theme worthy of mention. The poem “Stone Tape,” for example, involves the town of Avilla, MO, supposedly one of the most haunted places in America, and purportedly the site of a phenomenon called ‘stone tape,’ which entails, as a continual loop, the silent repetition of some sequence of events,

and carried out by ghostly specters. During the early 2000's, I visited the town of Avilla several times, and spoke with locals there who claim to have encountered these specters, walking the town in flashes, seemingly going about some routine unresolved. The poem "Variations on the Prairie Wisps at Mindenmines" describes an experience I had while camping at Grand Prairie State Park, wherein I witnessed ghostly lights dancing in the moonlight, an interaction that has proven a deep impact on my life and writing. Finally, the poem "Houdini Séance" involves the intersection of life and death at the periphery of the supernatural.

Having described these things I brought with me, I now turn to the things I have borrowed. In some respects, contemplating this facet of influence has been the most difficult part in constructing this thesis. Indeed, when reflecting on influence, one must recognize the often-unconscious nature of it, the slow and quiet absorption of style as something we breathe in over the years until it becomes part of us, like microflora in our lungs, a cosmos of outside life inside us. Some influences seem obvious to me, they call out in echo, whereas some required more microscopic techniques to identify.

In style and content, and mapping more broadly, I borrow from the Black Mountain Poets, the New York School (and its subsequent torchbearers), and the Deep Image Poets. These are the poets that have influenced me directly, the ones I can single out. However, in truth, the breadth of influence is probably legion. The musicality of Gwendolyn Brooks, for example, is something I greatly admire and have, in fact, imitated. The conversational quality of Cecil Helman, the complex vernacular of C.K. Williams, the confessional intimacy of Stephen Dunn – to some extent, these poets have lent me something, also.

From the Black Mountain Poets, I have borrowed the idea of the breath and its influence on the line: the “Projective Verse” of Olson and Creeley. Indeed, the sonic quality of a poem, how it reads aloud, has always been a consideration of mine, and contemplation of the breath as a determiner for line was something I learned from poet Michael Burns. The freedom exhibited by The Black Mountain Poets, the rejection of standard metrics of form, was something that attracted me as a young poet, and I have found myself returning to Charles Olson in my later years. During 2017, for example, I revisited Olson’s *The Maximus Poems* and *Archeologist of Morning* and found an important new appreciation for each. Olson’s command of language and the sonic qualities of his poetry are amazing to me. During my 20’s, I kept a copy of *The Selected Poems of Charles Olson* and in many respects, this was the only poetry I truly read. As such, I must acknowledge Olson as a decided influence. In this collection, the poem “Glade Top – Elephant Rocks” is an imitation of Olson’s “Lower Field – Enniscorthy” from *Archaeologist of Morning*.

Syntactically, my poetry borrows from the Black Mountain Poets, in particular, the work of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. In my writing, I do not always utilize punctuation in the proper, formal sense, a quality that, unfortunately, sometimes has proven a source of frustration in workshop. I borrow this from Olson and Creeley, the idea of the breath and its dominion over the line. I frequently find myself more concerned with the sonic qualities of my poems, particularly the idea of caesura, and again, I borrow this innately from the Black Mountain Poets.

The New York School Poets were ones I encountered later in my life, but they have been a formative influence, nonetheless. Particularly, the work of Frank

O'Hara and John Berryman. Although she wrote much later, I include Lynda Hull's work in this container, as well. The dynamic of juxtaposing high culture and low culture, a calling card of The New York School Poets, has been a source of inspiration to me and a technique that I have tried to incorporate into my own writing. The poems "Westport Duchess, 1999," "Police Scanner Fellowship," and "On Selling My Forklift" were written out of inspiration gleamed from The New York School Poets. In addition, the mystery of John Berryman and his mastery of paradox is something I have found myself returning to in my own writing. Although absent from this thesis, many of my poems feature an intimate, conversational-style influenced by Frank O'Hara and his idea of 'personism,' which involved an intimate connection between poet and audience. Essentially, O'Hara likened the quality to that of a phone call, and this intimacy between author and audience is something I have greatly admired. Lastly, the blending of high and low culture in the work of Lynda Hull, who I feel was a master, is a quality that I have found myself pursuing. As such, the New York School Poets deserve mention in a discussion of formative influence on my own writing. The qualities I have borrowed from these poets has been of great value to me.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I have borrowed from the Deep Image Poets, who were concerned with the importance of metaphor through imagery, particularly that of place and aesthetic element. One can see the influence of the Deep Image Poets markedly in the titles of many poems in this collection, which are defined by a high level of description as to time and place. Akin to James Wright's famous work "Lying in a Hammock on William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," the titles of many of my own poems share a similar degree of specificity as to locale. In this

collection, consider the poems “On Finding a Sandstone Discoidal in Taney County,” “Electrical Storms over Groom, TX,” “Sunlight Shining Through a Map Unfolding Maries County, MO,” “Factory Farm Smokestacks over Noel, MO,” “On Seeing the Albino Koi at Fellows Lake,” and “Backside View of a Brunette Mirage Pixelating into Ditmars.” Each features a title with a high degree of description as to setting. Regarding specificity of content, I bring attention to the titles of the poems “Precision in Identification of Fungi as Soil Stabilizers,” “Testing Compression Algorithms on Wedding Footage,” and “Metacognition on Learning Your Place.” I have always found the choice of title as an opportunity to elevate meaning in poems, to inject additional specificity, and this is a quality borrowed from the Deep Image Poets.

The work of William Carlos Williams bears mention on two counts. First, Williams’ concept of the stepped triadic line and the “variable foot.” In this collection, the poems “Electrical Storms over Groom, TX” and “Student Snapshots as Speci(men and Women) Slides” both feature stepped lines and this is a quality I borrowed from Williams. Secondly, and more importantly, is the work of Williams’ *Paterson*. In this volume, Williams pursued the idea of place, specifically his hometown of Paterson, NJ, and the concept of its embodiment in the life of a person. In some respects, the collection of poems in this thesis aims for a similar target. In my case, an embodiment of the American Prairie, shown at its margin through a recollection of a tableau of locales and experiences, each transfixed in a time specific to the experience of my life. As such, Williams has certainly been an influence on my poetry. Concerning form, the poem “Testing Compression Algorithms on Wedding Footage” is an imitation of Williams’ famous poem “The World Contracted to a Recognizable Image.”

In terms of content, and returning to a discussion on the importance of nature and naturalism, as well as a connection to animals, the poems “Traveling through the Dark,” by William Stafford, “Behaving Like a Jew,” by Gerald Stern, and Stanley Kunitz’s masterpiece “The Wellfleet Whale” deserve mention in a discussion of things I have borrowed. Each of these three poems involve the reconciliation of man’s interaction with the natural world, specifically animals, and a lament over each’s mutual-exclusiveness. These three poems feature a core of sadness and helplessness in the shadow created by the death of an animal, be it a rodent, as in Stern’s “Behaving Like a Jew,” or the majesty of Kunitz’s Wellfleet Whale. Poems such as these are an inspiration to me and provide encouragement to write about a love of nature, something that exists in my gut, my microflora.

Lastly, in discussing things that I have borrowed, I feel some mention of poetical form is warranted. As I have progressed in my writing, I have found myself coming toward a greater appreciation of poetical form. In ENG 786 (Form and Theory of Poetry), we explored a range of poetical forms and I had the opportunity to experiment within forms new to me. The poems “On Seeing the Albino Koi at Fellows Lake” and “Variations on the Prairie Wisps at Mindenmines” are both crown cinquains, specifically Crapsey Cinquains, which is an American form consisting of a syllable count of 2 – 4 – 6 – 8 – 2 (Finch and Varnes 391-392). This was a form which was completely new to me, and I have since used it in other poems not included in this thesis. Similarly, over the last two years, I have found myself writing in other forms, particularly the sonnet, haiku, tanka, and the villanelle. As an addendum, a villanelle poem that I wrote for ENG 786 was selected for the *Moon City Review*’s Editors Prize. Entitled “Stand for New

Anthem,” I am very proud to await that poem’s publication later this year. Hopefully, that work will be the first of many of my poems to be published, but as they say, time will tell.

So, I close with some thoughts about purpose – the how and the why of all this – why I write and what I hope to accomplish. Writing has always been a part of me and has proven to be a good catharsis during difficult periods in my life. For many years, I found myself writing to no audience, amassing, in private, a collection of poems that I figured would never be seen. I am glad to say that I have progressed since then and I hope, in the coming years, to share my work with the world. In the meantime, the path ahead calls, and so I end here with a quote from Melville’s *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities*:

From without, no wonderful effect is wrought within ourselves, unless some interior, responding wonder meets it. That the starry vault shall surcharge the heart with all rapturous marvelings, is only because we ourselves are greater miracles, and superber trophies than all the stars in universal space. Wonder interlocks with wonder, and then the confounding feeling comes (51).

This is how I felt watching those lights dance on the prairie, years ago. I hope the included collection of poems does them credit.

I. ROOTS

“Deep in their roots
all flowers keep the light”

Theodore Roethke

“The Vastness of the short-, mixed-, and tall-grass prairie of Pre-European
settlement times is almost impossible for us to comprehend today.”

Robert J. Robel, “Summary Remarks and Personal Observations
by an Old Hunter and Researcher”

SNOW PISS NAMES

When we didn't have voices,
Brian, I can see. Two brothers in bibs
unzipped out and peeing in the snow,
across the crisp wind of a new year
writing our names in a piss stream
and watching ice curl
on itself and cave into collapse
laughing, like snow monkeys
and swirling our young tongues
around alphabet names encircled
in the steam of the creek bed chert, black leaves
folded in the lap of those hardwoods hanging
and coming into the sun, the juvenile heat
becoming mist around our inhales.

DOG SEARCHING

for reward money
on afternoons into dusk
with Reed and a telephone pole
flier. Two kids on beat foot
and by bicycle, us whistling
for Lil' Pixie, the Pomeranian
princess, lost somewhere
in the fan grasses
and the elephant ears.

Listening for old Dottie
the Dalmatian pedigree
in the summer heat thirsty
and dreading we might find him
flattened, like the nameless
shepherd that last summer,
when we called an unknown widow
and divulged the street location
as anonymous oracles. Obligated

to this sense of childish saviors,
doing the wet work
wrestling Wermerieners
and Shelties, shaking mutts
of all creation, running loose
in wild miles, awaiting saving.
Returning them safe
in face-licking hand-offs
to overjoyed strangers in garages
paying some odd opposite
of ransom money to kids
home by daylight fading

and skidding out of gravel
into newly essential cases,
two pairs of reflectors
dog searching.

NEW ASHLAND CHICKENS

Nicole's chicken experience
as a kid telling me yelling
kids gathering and watching
about holding chest-level close
those docile, bird feet animals
resting on her blue jeans knee
sitting on a railroad tie pitch
and feeling the claws of the creature
pulled back against the spindle
fabric of her being aware amongst
birds relaxed and rested
docility in her kid's hands
holding a heartbeat.

She related to me palms
holding softly control
of this kind animal feathers
like I did, being kind
holding softly control
resonance being innocent
and holding in holding animals
loving animals and catching birds
flying toward the sun, the clouds
and being beautiful retainers.

A farm barn door
opening up toward cornstalks
letting more animals out exploring
into the trails of the grain
and the embrace of being people.

FESTIVAL CAMPFIRES

(for Reed)

Walking the BNSF tracks
by the ruins of Carl Junction High School
and crushing this railroad coal
in my fist into black powder -
blown about by the wind
and onto the fingerprints
left by the kids we were then

wading in that hot pond
and catching frogs, scraping
draping algae from our arms,
as comic Swamp Thing monsters
dripping slime trails across sand traps
on the derelict golf course

driving half-naked in the park
and lost in the national dark
exploration economics
of where \$20 could take you
in a bumper sticker with wheels
and a map on a concert flyer

directing out some footprint path
to yellow lights beyond the city
and the reach of a Minor in Possession,
we saw Big Smith play in an orchard
and slept in a spray-painted school bus,
awakening to this disbanding quiet

and scattered morning after
being stranded at the festival,
our sandals grayed with ashes
from soggy campfire pits
around the sagging tents
being dismantled and folded
into commencement flags.

HER SMILING

and listening to her laughing
and flashing her teeth -
a wall of lights
against the carnival rides
the end-summer winds
blowing into us from Kansas
and fanning warm sparks
off barrels burning balefires,
flames glowing their blinking
the dominion of sleeping
bags down damp and dreaming

the Ferris wheel sweeping
her wonder, her beaming
over the iron rides twinkling
and spinning the stars
above the skylights searching
into the clouds we were rising,
our soft sandals swinging
the handholds, the light-poles,
two balloons in the moonlight -
her smiling.

HILLTOPPING KIDS

The mosquito night sequestered
when the hilltopping kids vanished
in a flash of headlights gone dark,
shining sirens in the wheat field,
like the Marfa lights
bright, crashing plastic bits
of mirrors thrown into the street
and our imaginations
of someone else's children.

Front-yard aftermath conversations
about ambulances and alcohol
and bedraggled mothers in bathrobes
bouncing babies in blankets
and explaining real-life danger
over the soundtrack of an accident
over the hill, out of earshot
to sleepy six-year-olds
clinging onto light poles
and spinning.

Reflecting those sirens
onto 1984,
when I was some six-year-old
watching gray voles
run the bluegrass
in our yard on Holiday;
their dirt pathways
folding the grass blades
into soft tunnels
under the aurora
of an imaginary forest fire:

those voles were similar racers
and as a sunburned kid,
I remember saving them.

Rescuing their damp bodies
from the cat's crushing maw,
her huntress body practiced
holding them limp and helpless,
looking for someplace private
she could open up their insides.

I remember saving them
for the same reason
“wrong” is reversible
to a six-year old spinning
and listening to an aftermath
about an accident out-of-sight,
holding onto a broken creature
that would play stiff and dying
in my hands and turn over
to show its mouse mouth
open and gasping, its faint
breath a sly shudder
and its tiny, bloody teeth
looked like zippers.

Only it wasn't dead -
they never were, but playing a role -
what their mothers taught them
to do in an emergency,
like the mouth of a cat dripping,
or the headlights crashing
towards Hilltopping kids, -
when they ran out of options
and escape was a fairy tale.

Playing dead racers stiffening
in their theatrics - our roles -
when I would lay them private
in the shade sequestered
and put the cat up
behind the screen door
so voles could win

and roll their gray bodies rightly
and lick the blood from their teeth,
turning their ribbon ears
to the sun, veins full of blood
listening for quiet to feel safe
and escaping, unseen from giants
as movement in grass tunnels
and into the periphery -

disappearing innocently
into my imagination
as someone else's children.

ON FINDING A SANDSTONE DISCOIDAL IN TANEY COUNTY

I found a sandstone discoidal
in Taney County, in mountain country,
when I was in my early 30's,
at a place called Bear Creek,
near a horse ranch
where the local petty thieves
give trail rides to tourists.
Their paths leading passage
across the boulder rapids
and into the wooded periphery
of the Ozarks. The cupped stone

was wet, halfway lodged
in the peach-colored sand
of the panting, wooded edge,
of an ancient rock beach,
its small boulders a cannon field
where I once found a Medicine Bowl
in the warmest Summer rain
that flat sparkled.

Finding that game stone
and running it round my hand
and clumsy, calloused fingers,
I had a big time feeling
that welled up in the blood
around my heart skin drum
beating. I guess it was those
platelet rings flushing
and scraping the tissues
of the blued veins pulsing
and the blackened arteries,
coaxing them into memories
of the old, Indian blood
I've been told is a part
of my history.

I took a moment with that discoidal
after I washed it in the pinging waters
and stood for a while
on the sandy banks imagining
until I got still in recognizing
and I rolled it into the grass
of a nearby horse field,

like a child does gently
and eyes focused innocently
just to see the turns it might take
like adults do.

Retrieving that disc from the grass
after it turned left only a little
after falling over and resting
I could smell a bit the edge
of the mustard plants
just touched and shaken
in the little flattened pathway.
It carried me back to places special -
to Ashland - that smell of pennyroyal
and I touched the wet disc to my heart
as some proxy - my fingers
exploring and flexing the texture
as I put my wet shirt on one-handed.

It was a [~]

rubbing away the sand to shape it round
and flat, with a hole in the middle
that was the target point for their spears
or their arrows or marbles. The Osage.

The sand rubbed off sticking, grit in my hands
like little pieces of glass, reflecting shine
the sun overhead from the river bottom
and the nettles.

WANDERLUST FRIENDS

When we climbed the Live Oak trees in Austin
after your wedding and still in our tuxedos
that we fitted in that morning and now worn
more than by my body this time and the summer,
I knew it was a day I'll see dying
in the flashbulbs and the heavy breathing,
battered to witness this passing

and there were no bugs
in the reachings through the Sphagnum
toward the sun setting honey
and I wanted to tell you I loved you platonically
that I needed to be told I wasn't dying fully crazy,
when we hugged those branches
and I felt the bark bite me back
in my chest under my bow-tie,
it didn't matter bruising
like an apple and fermenting.

I can never know that moment without sadness
and I know it is a part of me -
this lonesome and confusing galaxy
that no guide can ever map through.

When we joined in the carousel
of brunette bridesmaids in their garters
and white teeth like fresh powder
outside Copper Mountain
and groomsmen strong and shining,
around her family and your mother,
who I missed for ten years faulting,
there was a feeling like someone might hug me,
and take these blue cancers
and black holes out of my body
by grace or levitation or love
and they would listen
and they would tell me the truth
about how we aren't bad people,
but that we feed on a frequency
that once dust scattered rainbows
across a world of sand

enshrouding some great Shaman waiting
just beyond that horizon, now darkening
to receive and transmit the message
of our arriving close to home and finding
slow-dancing friends in the torchlights
and being well with ourselves
and our wanderlust journeys,

maybe for the first time I
needed to know that belonging -
hugging those trees and fermenting -
feeling this part of me ending,

Camille.

THE GLASS LIZARD

I.)

Exposed for the first time
in years to hot sunlight coronas
held at bay by a cold shale-stone

roof for two years diurnally coiled
in a squashed blanket of dried pine needles
no longer acrid, but sweet, black earth now -

made soft by body friction nesting
holding into secrecy and insect prey
modals gentle quiet was the Glass Lizard.

II.)

Holding him up to the treeline
and coiled in my hand, striped black
across a body of tan as the savannah,
this legless beauty a forest oddity

bound for preteen prize status
amongst gentle boys imbibing in science
and the rumors of rarity still left pondered
in the world of Troop 7 at Arrowhead Camp.

This “lizard snake”’s long lineage evolved to shed legs
and live as secretive predators, hunting crickets
at night in the wither pines. Some creature genus
blended outside this trans habitation of our natures.

III.)

I kept him for two hours calm in a paper cup
on the picnic table of our campsite safe
and its tents on concrete slabs, our collective
of boys leaving for fire starting training

and returning to find that cup blowing

on the ground and the glass lizard stomped
translucent into the mud and the dried leaves
displaying his blue insides as a specimen slide.

What I wouldn't pay now in possessing adulthood
to bring him back, tuck his insides gently
into that exploded blowhole in his side
and carry him off back whole to the quiet dark

and the shale-stone sanctuary, uplifted roots
of his hiding, private life on that pine top
and saving him from a world of interior
sentients unprepared for the existence

of such a doppelganger, holding accountable
the snake of their perception, laughing
at some ancient, transitioning creature helpless
under their boot heels, avenging their damned Eve.

PENTECOSTAL REVIVAL CHILD

Searching for the snake-handling church
of rumored elephants,
in the Elk river bottom
I tucked a can of tobacco
into my back pocket
and took a seat facing a stage
under the revival tent called Amalgam

there were rows of folding chairs
organized in the grass shadows
along a sunbeam crested
onto the tube of an oxygen tank
connected to a Marlboro Man
of seventy, looking blank to a card table

of paper cups full of lemonade
and sun tea in pickle jars
bouncing lemons filtering the sunlight
against the sweaty foreheads
of five families of river congregates sat
the silent, sunburned child called Rope Swing

who drew lines full of characters
out of caricature, his brothers in the air
flailing and falling toward water currents
in the green eddies that lead out of Anderson
onto the margins of an orange handbill
that read "Walking into Zion"
framed a crude picture of a man
and a fleshy stick woman
and a smoking motorcycle

drawn in motion marks
from the fidgeting thumbs
of a David child, 12
years of sweat signatures
within the creases of his forehead
demarcating an attendance in body,
but not minding these daydreams
of escaping McDonald County

and this crusted, antique mud show
of traveling tent performers
taming lionization in the raffles

and walking trembling fault lines
from Abraham to Zipporah
aggregating stories from antiquity
across currents kids know better.

WESTPORT DUCHESS, 1999

Girl in the dog collar
making a scene in the alley -
cobblestones testing her heels
with her razor blade bangs
and her switchblade comb
falling out into cold puddles -
reflecting the streetlights
off the gleam of a leash chain
chased around her hips
in a black vinyl skirt
and Nicole Brown Simpson's face.

She “eats like everyone else”
she screamed, contradictions
from a bowl of sterile Cheerios
prepared for her from a trust fund
folder and *not on the floor*
in front of company, darling
dragging her menstruation
across the Stainmaster® carpet
and howling at the subwoofers
and scents of the basketball courts
beyond the chaperone curfews
of private school storm shelters
desperate for a stand-up man
to prove that he was capable.

We saw her being thrown out
of the nightclub in Westport,
giving the flared finger
to the burly bouncer shivering
and telling all the gay guys gawking
to *stick it up their asses*.

We saw class like that animation
stumbling whole down an alley
toward an awaiting, private driver
before there were everyday cell phones
or Instagram stars in a night out,
drunk in the snow, prospecting
duchesses yelling for more offense

and no one even cared
to take a picture
or dictate the contradictions
of that chaste Westport Duchess
and her Princess Diana face
at the end of a millennium

FACTORY FARM SMOKESTACKS OVER NOEL, MO

I'm having trouble coping
saw the wheels sharp and cutting
saw the aluminum cages, clasps
the white feathers in the street
bedding down the chopped beaks,
blue gloves grabbing the clawed feet,
the slow suffrage and the meat
and the pink blood wrapped in plastic.

I saw the factory farm smokestacks
blowing steam from biofuel bones
into the cliffs by Bluff Dweller's Cave.
I saw the bubbling, protein foam
on the drowsy, brown eddies, my paddle
dripping back into the cold currents
of the Elk River in Noel, MO
where the town's social workers
still answer childrens' letters to Santa -
their clumsy, crayon pink slips
asking for their father's pay stubs
asking for pug puppies and pink ponies
and cheap, Wal Mart toys made of plastic.

Buying gasoline at a Shell Station
I saw the Tyson plant workers
standing in line buying lottery tickets
and day-old egg rolls
rolling under red lights
and the smell of menthol cigarettes
and wet jeans and wet cardboard.

Me with a case of Natural Light
over my tan, naked shoulder
trying to block out the sun
trying to blacken the reflection
off a computer monitor projecting
factory floors, grimy images
of the work these men do.

A small one, with hair like camping
talks about hot sauce and women
and uses six different cuss words
in ten seconds in three sentences
slapping the back of a pony-tailed punk

and laughing loud to sound tough.
I saw the young, Mexicans shuffling,
cashing yellow checks for phone cards
and cans of Tecate and Copenhagen.
I understood words "mother" and "brother"
and "...working in Sonora."

Conceiving the cramped cages
that contain us - the dripping chickens
the migrant workers, the alcoholics
blocking out the arc light
rising up and cresting
the tops of the smokestacks
and the morning fog on the river
and this disappearing wilderness.
The wind wisping white down fluffs
into rain puddles and yellow curbstops
and work boots and gated checkpoints
across the parking lots of Tyson.

If I had my way I'd shoot
greasy bullets into their faces
into their noses becoming roses
on the egg roll cabbage
and jump through the glass
shattering the gas station door
and get baptized, cleansed
by the cave men spirits
pouring Evian over my everything
in the pines on the bluffs
and the brown river
and the perfect future
uncurling like perfume,
but I am part of this
and you are part of this
these cages these feathers
in the parking lot, this suffering
waves of ash-colored smoke
rising up over Noel, MO.

"Credit or debit, sir?"
I said I didn't care;
it didn't matter.

II. VERNALIZATION

“Vernalization is the flowering process by which prolonged exposure to cold temperatures promotes flowering...”

~ Richard Amasino, “Vernalization,
Competence, and the Epigenetic
Memory of Winter”

“Within the last 200 years, cultural practices converted more than
99% of tallgrass prairies to intensive agriculture...”

Henry F. Howe, “Managing Species Diversity in Tallgrass
Prairie: Assumptions and Implications”

“A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in
thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times”

Randall Jarrell

ELECTRICAL STORMS OVER GROOM, TX

Lightning striking the old Enron grid
from blue-black clouds higher up
in the coldness, the bruising of water
molecules collecting and turning electrical
shooting down in an instant screaming

the maps

the windmills

the coal cars

and into the fog of the nations:
the haze of old civilizations
driven from this borderland:
their tracks long buried,
beneath these twisted fences
and the water towers, bent
along the rails - carried racing
power to the Panhandle.

Remoteness in the events here

by the bent water tower

are invoking tears falling
from the faces of the spirits
of the Pawnee and the war dogs
eaten. The plains grasses windy
swirling your whole body in a circle
with your eyes open and looking
at the electrical storms
building over the crosses:

three huge, white crosses

screaming for lightning
into the jasper-colored sky
over Groom, Texas, dying
and drying out in a triad
silent in this 100-year drought
wishing for lightning.

Those crosses casting shadows
across the history forgotten
in a tumble of weeds
and an oil can blowing.

The crumbled ground sponge soaking
any raindrops eaten instantly
by the dead wheat and the dust
and the jackrabbit huddled shivering,
under the water tower
listening and forecasting.

COVALENCE LAKE MICHIGAN

Fo(u)r years
since I heard her wraith
form into stormed stories
about this eerie Lake water
in Michigan, where the parasols
flapped over the sand at Dugout Bar,
where her eyes blinked to seagull
wings over the shirtwaist of Jason
appearing and disappearing,
into an albatross' wake,
as if the lake effect snow
bore his birth and consumed,
his back turned in the wind
holding a fishpole.

F5

The steel CB knobs and electronic, NWS voices
rattling chatter about some terrifying
monster in the skies over Kansas
over a mile wide and like a black hole
swirling, opening up in the sky
some terrible Kraken sucking the wind
and telephone poles and trees from the forest
when the sky looked like a black tarp
descending on their everything in Joplin,
before the sirens started screaming.

They were huddled in the walk-in freezer
at the gas station called "Kum 'n Go"
when the lights went out
and their cell phones went dead
and the building turned sideways
they were screaming and praying
in the hospital beds
too far to reach the basement
when the windows blew out all at once
and the helicopters blew off the roof
and onto the pavement and the big bricks
got sucked out into the nightmare
all around them, the electricity wires
flailing like sparking whips in the wind
and the Caterpillar air hanger collapsed
over the big machines and helmeted heads,
like a dynamited Casino
in the blackest blackness.

The sirens went quiet when they failed,
when they blew out in explosions
the transformers spraying out sparks
like yellow sparklers in the poles
and then quiet in the rain
and the distant thunder
the car alarms ringing useless
from neighborhoods distant
and the sounds of far ambulances
and the coughs of a voice fading off
in the twilight.

Then the morning came and the hazy sun
shone down on half-dressed, bleeding people

walking dazed in the rubble, calling
for their dogs, their lost wives
and tripping over backs and limbs
and long hair out of ball caps
in the cinder blocks broken,
while some were just standing
there helpless, trying to refresh
their memory, the frantic words
and the images of this encounter -
F5.

We went there the week after
to observe the broad disaster
it was the only time I ever saw my grandpa cry.

We were standing in the ruins
of this new Nagasaki
the car doors in the trees that were left
just trunks reaching up, spearing debris.
We saw the gray pavement cracked
and leaking downhill cold water
the chimneys of the houses, now powder -
the front doors splintered and glass shattered -
the muddy clothes strewn everywhere -
our rubber shoes crumbling the rubble
of St. Johns, my mom's hand on his shoulder -
his mind crashed in the wonder.

If you asked me what "F5" meant five years ago
I would have said it refreshes computer memory,
it reloads the pages, the images on the screen
and into our eyes the new words, the new pictures
of our learning.

Ask me now, what it means now - "F5"
and my voice would become a robotic relay
National Weather Service alert from 2011
rattling chatter about some black hole
swirling in the skies over Joplin.
Some terrifying Kracken,
some mile-wide, black tarp
that came and took them.

MALLS OF AMERICA

I've been chasing a dream
since I was fourteen and clean
and wandering the bright halls
of the malls of America,
watching the rubber escalators
moving young, foxlike faces
into glass display cases -
their toe tags - price tags -
the individual bar code
of the billboard union
the Baby Boomers sold us.

Twenty years later
now I sell holey rocks
from the bended rivers
for \$100 to an artist
who lost her voice
for 2-years in New Jersey.
I sell iron pieces of Ozark wagons
to a crippled, old dreamer
in New Hampshire
who recreates cattle drives.
I sell bird's nests
and brown beehives
and the powder of amber
to a Vietnamese man named Sam,
who fled wildfires burning hillsides
in California.

I still sleep on the floor
like I've done since fourteen
and I calculate odds
of ever reaching that dream
at the top of the escalator:
the bright lights shining
in a pearly white store
where you can buy 98.6 degrees
of everything.

METACOGNITION ON LEARNING YOUR PLACE

awake informed in a duplex-printed world of media casters,
where lonely psychopaths poison water bottles
and cups of beer at football games for the thrill

of being important and blogged. From news we are told to fear
these places, the seats of the stadium in high-definition
our chins dripping foam from the vats of global conglomerates

on the screen beam our eyes focus on the beautiful, tan legs
and blonde hair, the muscles. The ugly bodies, too- shown shorn
we see in their cancer, their busted veins and ruddy eyeballs

from a no-sleep life, where Anonymous scale firewalls
looking for revenge against a label. About helicopters
heat-vision and memos from above the pristine glass ceiling

where the leather soles of the executives' feet shuffle
above our heads and dance in a droll sort of cadence
that has two steps and one is learning your place

with barking dogs hushed by a whisperer on the Television,
looking back at us and snapping his fingers. We all form
a line and finger-bang terrorists, brown sunning people

kneeled. Their backs to us, facing Mecca sunrise. Their ears
aligned to some black cube shining we won't understand
at the heart of this frustration in sunny Bisbee, AZ;

where Doug Stanhope finally drinks himself to death
in a bed made of paper. Lonely and arid, his crusted mouth
a panhandler swallowing "All I Told was I told You So."

REFLECTING ISRAEL KEYES

I was a purple nightshade blooming,
blinking lighter flint manic
in a 6-day insomnia episode
watching Israel Keyes handcuffed
in a blank interview room
from a fizzing computer screen
amongst a blue-black tornado watch
and there was 6-min of silence.

Only a loud, buzzing sound
from an FBI microphone
hidden in the drop ceiling
and that man didn't move -
he just sat like a glacier.

Israel Keyes slit his white wrists
with a prison razor
five days later
and yelled "hatred".

A piece of sour metal
swallowed coughing in the cafeteria -
a plastic, non-natural,
manufactured blade passing naturally -
days later in the daylight
by an aluminum sink
against a bed bolted to concrete
a thin, metal tongue
forced in the cool hand
against trembling, blue lines
in a moment of pouring ochre
that said "exit sign"
and looked like a drive-through wedding.

Israel Keyes owned a name
that meant "struggles with religion"
and he spent installing skylights
inhaling the tail pipe
of the Alaskan pipeline
in a childhood amongst nine others
on the muddied outskirts of Anchorage
they toss around the words "frontier town"

and wear rubber boots you can't buy here.

My knees bouncing pistons
around invisible ashtrays
sitting watching an interview room
display 6 minutes of silence
in a chair spent reflecting
an existence robbing banks
in a "Scream" mask
waving a revolver
at WASP-white suburbia
and roaming this American flight plan
with two old brands on his body,
that represent "Satanism"
and born in 1978 under an umbrella
called "Fellowship of Christian Athletes"
and a Holiday Inn hotel suite
with a padded chair called "old loneliness"
and a bible-scorned argument
about being bisexual,
where he broke a door
and yelled "hatred".

(Reflection on Israel Keyes
April 3rd, 2014)

ON TRAVELING 60-MILES WITH A DRAGONFLY

Near Jasper
and headed toward some headwaters
where my parents pitched fits and tents
in the 1960's, I was driving live flowers
on Decoration Day for my hallows. Alone

there was a dragonfly

perched on my shoulder, driving I
had its wings fanning my cheeks. I
didn't want it to leave me. I

drove all the way to a grave, some
60-miles with the windows down. I
was hoping I was feeling a camera. I

had prepared something more, I was rehearsed, but
it didn't work. I felt insect stiffness
against me, sticking my shirt. I

felt it stuck, claws into me. Driving unfeeling friend
some unlikely companion with the windows howling
open. Counties, I watched the signs with a dragonfly. I
didn't want it to leave me. I
wouldn't let it leave me.

PRECISION IN IDENTIFICATION OF FUNGI AS SOIL STABILIZERS
(Field recording notes, Pitcher, OK – 11-08-2015)

I can smell mold by this arson scene, still
long quieted and washed by rain, graying
in Pitcher, Oklahoma, I was hunched down
and kneeled in the wheat grass in November

establishing an aluminum tripod, wet
for a video camera eye, half-frozen
pointed toward burned-black ruins
and a teddy bear, a house from the elements

some child's blanket, damp
is stained with old pepperoni
and I can hear the protein nuclei
from factory farm swine in the wind squealing

as part of an analog conversation
over a dinner table from Menard's
about leaving in the morning
toward some bridge in Minneapolis.

The car horn, when the semi's blew rain
onto the hood of a Volkswagon
and the morning cigarettes weren't enough
haze to diffuse the enshrouding of ruins.

I saw a shopping cart, twisted
full of boxes, burned to powder, in the rubble
of a General Store and someone's frustration
about the precise generality of "nowhere"

in my nose-hairs, I spent flecks
of my own molecules inflecting
this ingestion of spores toward my bronchios
expanding into gasps, this absorption

and it smelled like the earth,
when I put my hands in dirt, planting
any little, green thing I feel I've saved
from extinction or forgetting

and pulling some example
off the shelf and telling myself
this place is where I was meant
to play a savior.

STONE TAPE

(Reflections on Avilla, MO ghost town 2015)

Five pounds of antique bullets
lodged inside a sad sycamore
they called “the hanging tree”
above old mattresses in the snow,
there is this painted sign
made of burned fenceposts
that reads “*Horses stolen here.*”

The quiet locals spoke of ghosts
called “Stone Tape”
that walk the brown fields
and Amish barn alleys
shuffling in a silent trance
and looking like gray people
blinking into pillars of smoke
walking across littered yards
and doing some routine
past a whirled world
spinning backward
into a ghost town.

A dead, gray beehive
waving in the wind
and the sound of a Civil War trumpet
above deaf echoes of routine
some small pouch of sweat leather
spills gunpowder onto a table
full of clamps and horse teeth.

And these gray ghosts roam
in Dust Bowl clothes
looking for horses stolen
in the night fires
and their lives stolen
in the war graves - gray

lives sheared off
in the teardrop mop
then shuffled into strobe-light.

Stone Tape.

Some backwater, Albatross
moss-covered gravestone
above ground that was too cold
to sleep or make love on.

Stone Tape.

SUNLIGHT SHINING THROUGH A MAP
UNFOLDING MARIES COUNTY, MO

Memorizing ten thousand paper cranes
floating on the Gasconade, us ducking

under the paper lantern lights rising, at dusk
we saw the gestating flock asleep, peeping

amongst cottonwood dander landing as
confetti across still water patience, alighting

a haze when we waded there, I ran my hand
against the limestone cliffs for leagues and fell

under water over folding your handhold
into folding your bandanna across

my arms, folding your shirt under and over
the crease of your shoulders, as a plumb line

of light scattering my sunset blindness, peripheral
pupil into cool dilation underpinning my eye over

your navel staring into each other until it was over
our heads floating lanterns and now onto paper

remember? Looking at the flock like rubber
duckies and 22nd birthday candles, dismantling

smiles into each other's freckles and cotton mouth,
the moonlight water lapping our lips and laughing

at the feeling of armpits night swimming,
when we could still map life onto paper.

HOUDINI SEANCE

Socialites, Masons, and mediums
with Flapper gloves and amber amulets
have met around this circle table
and a thousand, similar others
for 75-years now
lit by iron candelabras
and bearing the personal effects
of the greatest known illusionist:
pocket-watches and handkerchiefs,
shackles and stamped, wrought chains
on black velvet runners,
while cryptic whispers
and inviting, hedonist nods
affording affairs are lit
in the orange flicker
on Halloween night:
the anniversary of his passing
white gloves roll over gently
the swirled, crystal globe:

Houdini seance

Some arcane cabal
trying out summoning:
some gesture, some sign,
some weird instruction
of how he made it out
as time's great escape artist,
breaking bank safe locks
from the stippled, iron insides
of an old time vault
and showing us a glimpse
of the secret, dark interior
then crawling out
and waving goodbye
and reentering,
shutting the cast door
as the purple curtains close
and the audience stand up
and applaud his disappearing.

THERMAL VISION SAPIENT

Maybe the mathematicians
at conference collective
in this hotel ballroom
could talk about probability
without asterisks
and tell me unflinching
about why Tim died
from chemical weapons
of Saddam Hussein
and why I'm fighting
chemical weapons
every day and a container
and dying denying this residue.

How his leg rotted off
in a hospital bed
when I loved him
and he quit with a 106-degree fever
and I couldn't calculate
the odds of replacing
our dynamics in chemicals.

His voice screaming at me
on an answering machine
and walking in on him dead
in an envelope
explaining his shadow
burned into the wall
of my apartment kitchen
and his hand up, waving goodbye
in a hero's "you're welcome."

Changing my channel
every minute for ten years
in searching for some other voice
that could say "I love you,"
like my hand on a radio dial now
listening to some story

about pressure on Greece
to install heartbeat detectors
and thermal vision cameras
on their border guard capabilities
to find more refugee stowaways

cringing in the dark, afraid
and holding onto hope about heroes
in this maelstrom of what makes a union.

THE PERSEID METEORS

Shaving my body clean of black hair
under the Perseid meteors
showering the swirled sky
over the porchlight
and this little part of Earth,
until I was shorn, like a boy
ready to find a new girl
and start over, after so long
out into the blackness -
finally ready to show myself.

Looking for a woman
I could hold, like a candle
out from under the roof
and into the Autumn sky
standing in new handholds
and lifting a flashlight
up to the Perseid Meteors
saying "welcome back,
you mad flock of twins.
Here I am, beautiful
boy again."

III. TILLERING | SENESCENCE

“To make a prairie it takes clover and one bee
one clover, and a bee,
and revery
The revery alone will do,
if bees are few”

Emily Dickinson
“To Make a Prairie (1755)”

“The Seventh North American Prairie Conference was held at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri, 4-6 August 1980. Over 400 wildlife biologists, botanists, prairie and range managers, and lay prairie enthusiasts attended.”

Bill T. Crawford, “The Seventh Annual North American Prairie Conference”

“Bell (1980) defines adolescent survival as the average rate of survival from the age when an organism is first capable of reproducing to the age when it actually reproduces.”

Ned Fletcher, “Optimal Life-History Characteristics and Vegetative Demography in *Eriophorum Vaginatatum*”

ON SELLING MY FORKLIFT

Training my dragon Komatsu
to drink 89 octane from a can
and breath smoke of hydraulics
raised up sixteen feet
into the wind carrying bundles
of pipes full of millipedes
dirt in their shaking out
casualties across the gravel
yard towards oak beams compressing
laying pipes down slow, adding
over the creaks and weight
of that experience leaving
the pipe yard gates
towards a limousine shop
and a buyer from Craigslist
sixteen blocks across town
to find how well my baby
handled pavement and old turn
signals pointing my direction
roaring slowly in gray legality
towards an envelope of money
and a hope about mastering
English

in exchange for my dragon
and too long unloading trucks
and carrying boxes by shoulder
in a blue shirt and a patch
with my name on it.

POLICE SCANNER FELLOWSHIP

the half cross-eyed clerk
who I've known by nine encounters
passing up that foggy hill
and buying night-time victuals,
I had run into his thick glasses
and the way that he acted
from an older, inherited style
that defined him taxidermically.

He had a 1950's yearbook-type haircut:
the image of a lawnmower blade
glancing a scalp at high speed,
and a face out of some helicopter video
from the Vietnam War.

I found him hunched behind the counter
and he was there just unresponsive -
listening to the police radio
chatter out stern voices
of tan-collared lieutenants'
exchanges into the frozen night
and out the speakers of his iPhone
on the smudged countertop
above the glass segregating
glossy lottery tickets facing up
and concealing the bunched-up wires,
the floor safe and the vulnerability
the owner's kept private,
like the details of the holdup
in their parking lot the night before
and that didn't make the papers.

We talked once, one midnight
when I had time to listen
about how he was 27 and half
downtrodden. He sparked stories
about fishing out Pomme de Terre
and slew out laminated pictures
of homemade furniture
he made with his father
in a village called Blackjack

and sold in tents at swap meets.

Across the scanner breaking fuzz,
we heard fizzing about a robbery
and that tenant froze up listening
and I gave him that moment.

I gave him my minutes and a quarter
peace that I held for months forgotten
and found in the crease of my wallet,
my idle hands fussing about
receipts and shreds of tobacco
in the torn pocket of my coveralls.
I gave him a moment with a face,
where he felt safe in the night
amongst the chatter of a police scanner
yelling out some crime spree details
into the night toward the awning lights,
these numerical codes and descriptions
of bad things happening elsewhere,
to unfamiliar strangers across town.

PROFESSORS OF OUR PAST

wore sandals, that laced high up
they bought in Greece
on sabbatical, smiling in some wonder
when they looked up at ancient pillars,
under the moon on the Myrtos coast
and came back lecture prophets.

On planes, they smoked cigarettes
and filled up the sky with hazed
compartments full of stung
martinis, flinging their journeys
across a dark ocean and forward
toward the city lights, back home.

The sand still in their hair,
smelling like the ocean.

STUDENT SNAPSHOTS AS SPECI (MEN & WOMEN) SLIDES

Affixing pictures
of students to note-cards
full of scribbled bits
about their trips to Japan
and Paris
and Afghanistan
and their bright aspirations
about building planned developments
and nursing under the hospital lights.

Notes about bowfishing on Wappapello
Lake and someday returning
to the beach outside Camp Pendleton.

My exercise, memorizing
44 names
and their corresponding
faces

glinting sheen, the reflection
of today's daylight
off transparent tape
over their faces
holding them forever
in time and to paper. Stilled
as darkened slides, crisp, stilted
for projection, against university hallways,
where only their outlines glow through.

TRADING PLACES

(for Alfredo)

I never forgot how I tendered
shares of myself on Instinet,
before the falling short salers'

voices negotiated bonds,
I still dream the stairs
to Cantor Fitzgerald.

From the metal windows' panorama
beaming light of morning, NYC
gleam about being ray gun

glint from the top of the Republic
before the falling, mine so quiet
and telephoned, but still an unnegotiated

cost against this worth of ten thousand
steaming steel girders now shell middens
amassed in Fresh Kills; about ten thousand

bulldozer tracks in dust and worth those
hardhat reflectors' price, steel lunchboxes
trending with stickers of the Big Apple

curling back in toward the center
and somewhere in there is Alfredo.

CRAYOLA COLORED PENCILS AS SUISEKI
(or *Faber Castell Landscape*)

Color draw the compounded line
ash carbon black, mixed Crayola packed

rainforest trees bulldozed
near red clay roads
swallowing shuddering machines. Tires
smoke, internal starter clicking. Leaded

enamel, yellow metal. Sparking sheath
holding the gear guts in hot, spinning
from the tree light, butterfly light
drawing a line called daybreak.

Wheels justifying the cut. Margins
of the edges of the forest. Perimeter
drawing in smaller, blackness
encroaching as the night. A chainsaw

sculpture of a forest cat jaguar. Curled,
Lacewood body. Burned black and sooty
realistic. Tagua nut eyes. Consumer tourists
haggling in Sao Paulo about the price.

MIR

Orbiting the moon

my voice paper airplanes
across grade school desk, crayons,
some boy became astronaut helmet
“tell me you love me.”

Going into the dark
and the sucking soundless
and these gloved hands
pantomime space suit, spacewalk.

My breath fogging up glass
my heart a multimeter
voice coordinates, perimeter
spinning compass the cold vacuum
this mirror of my eyes
going into the dark.

I am going away now
on the other side of the sun
between us geologists

and I am deciphering black
from blue-black from bleary.

Tell me you love me.

FIREWALL LIGHTS

My funeral home attic experience
was one of the weirdest,
in a time of stranger lights,
when I used to wire buildings
and install CCTV, security systems
and tel-com cable commercially

wiring this otherwise domicile
with a kitchen and half-bath
climbing into the attic through a port
in the embalming room
and above this corpse of Pearl Auntie,
laid out on an aluminum gurney
set against the wall between cabinets
and covered with a paper blanket -
her sunk face an offering plate;
this ossified church lady Baptist
watching me climb into darkness.

Scooting on splintered cross-timbers
amongst yellow rows of rolled Batts,
my gleaming shears in the headlamp
skinning the sheath of blue cable
to expose its twisted pairs,
I fiddled with wire terminations
and signal repeaters, bringing light
to an old network gone silent.

My sore voice a haunt
hollering down from the dark
to the night attendant below the ceiling
of the room where he'd sleep
in this muffled back-and-forth,
my dampened yells asking
if he saw a light start to blink
on the face of a firewall
and if so, what color it was.

He listened to these cold fans
grab power and start to spin,
as automatons in attenuation

awakening from hibernation
and giving their feedback,
like Frankenstein
I heard his voice enthusiastic
through the old insulation
"its live. Hey! Its live"!

He thanked me yelling. He thanked me
climbing down a ladder onto tile.
He thanked me with a check,
as I finished these calibrations
on a machine lighting up blinking
in the room where he slept,
in a pattern of wood paneling,
cold tile, and aluminum sinks -
every week some new Pearl Auntie
and the faucet drip in the night
attenuating to lights on that black box -
his only live companion in the dark.

TESTING COMPRESSION ALGORITHMS ON WEDDING FOOTAGE
(after William Carlos Williams)

in a time of looking back
at ballroom conversations
mostly her family -
sounds of conscience

strangers' conversations
reaching for a mesh of memory
shrinking file size garbled their voices
easier sent but then nonsense.

ON MIDNIGHT WATERING DURING A HEAT WAVE

Funny how subliminal
this midnight watering chore
and dip swelling spit
enthralls the animals
inside mint leaves dripping
off a hose spray lovingly
pissing and hissing
off heat, relaxing. Soaked

my wet sandals
squeaking like peep frogs
in the cut grass
and smelling the air
of a Jasmine phantasm
calling anonymous mates
to a fenced-in corner
of dripping wood
out of sight
of the gleaning eye
and the watching thirst
of other animals, panting.

NOTES ON THE POWERLIFTING COMPETITION
(October, 2017; Springfield, MO)

Watching the MP3 laser light, metal battery
and tracking me in the playwright darkness
sunken, moving a stainless beam like a toy
in accommodating my eyes' imbalance

across the new astigmatism, adjusting
this powerful twinning of blue light
that I couldn't squirm away from some
tractor tracking me, like an exercise in

calibrating who my friends were – taking my
83-year old grandmother to Grad School
and getting \$10.20 hamburgers: "The Full Ride,"
while The Strokes played "Electricityscape"

and she fumbled orange fries into ketchup
over a \$53 bill about takeout. We spent
6-hours at the power lifting competition
seeing Aaron and his musculature – 4ft wide

across the shoulders, squatting 690 pounds
like he was a water buffalo yoked to a combine
outside Greenfield, MO and my aunt Sara
recognizing cancer as something she could

get back up from and we *said push*
that force up, goddamn it, Aaron. Seeing us
as a collective laser beaming into his heart
in a moment of us all being there once.

REFLECTING SAM SHEPARD

Would it be enough, Sam Shepard
to explain that I am a wanderer
wandering, been wandering, wondering

and in the leaf of a library book, green
I heard you? Outside of the motel
in New Mexico, in the white plastic pool chair

I thought about stealing. The damselflies
lighting up crust of a 60-watt lightbulb
and the Coke machine glow

about this borrowed copy of *Day*
Out of Days. And hearing your voice
talk about facing it. The death

of the West in your heart defibrillator
and the hallway full of family portraits
you thought were just for show, hypocrite

in your hindsight and the echoes of heartbeats
thunder. And waking up on the garage floor
not knowing if it was you or me, stalled

but accepting the Grand Guignol
of your vision, blinking severed heads
and skinned faces of hitmen contracts

and the facts about lamentation
in a doorframe. Watching it and waiting
for a woman, son, grandson, great-granddaughter

and the weight of getting these years
on your shoulder. Some buried child of the 1960's,
combining that with L.A. flamingos' blackness

in the mine yard and the trailer door
I heard you. I feel it in the 24-hour news
in the flame from burning yearbooks

outside of a storage unit in Yuma

and dust somehow under your feet
in socks in boots on doormats

and lost pictures of yourself smoking
dope with playwrights and Indians and rock
starts that shone outlasted shimmer.

Would it be enough, I hope, to imprint
into a sign language, into the July sky
over and over and over

I heard you. I heard you. I heard you.

ON SEEING THE ALBINO KOI AT FELLOWS LAKE

White glow
Where are you from?
What slow tributary,
what gardener transplanted pearls
that swam?

Homeless
still as sleeping
then awakened, bursting
into the dimmer, colder dark
unseen.

One chance
operations
to meet in the shallows
intersecting loneliness I
felt there.

Stranger
to a new world
of reservoir water
with its eddies, currents,
mysteries.

These paths
that cross buoys
at the surface, marking
depths and topographies, gauge them
alone.

GLADE TOP – ELEPHANT ROCKS
(after Charles Olson)

The footprints like impressions
in bedspreads in blankets
lie elephants
in the gladed dark
at the demarcation
waiting for all eons

A concession of vultures soaring
paints
shadows across treeline swift
glimpses of the sky
in flight

A stag beetle walks
back and forth endlessly
on a stick in the hand

Two whitetails stop
in the clearing, then disappearing
into the transcendent glen

Report: over all
this life.

Backside View of a Brunette Mirage Pixelating into Ditmars

Maybe there doesn't have to be any transformation. Maybe there doesn't have to be any transformation. Maybe she didn't mean to stay gone, but still beside me when she said *imagine*. Maybe there doesn't have to be any transformation. In our fingerprints on curio cabinets full of days when we saw comets. With stars in her coat that looked like ground glass walking through the turnstile into Astoria and her backpack zipper whispered when it gave back my notepad and these lines of peopled zig-zags and lines of intersecting destinations, predestinations. Maybe she couldn't rest on explanations, as a faucet drip in the night of her in-determination. I watched her freeze as a wall of gray slate and pixelate into ground glass galaxies, populating memory imprint. Print this. Someday print this. Someday print this.

RECORDING EASTPORT

After seeing the whirlpool at Eastport
and debris in the slow spin,
I remember walking the beach
into a silent film
about icebergs and distance:

footprints framed against gray waves
and oyster skies - birdless and windy
and exaggerated forms
of the pier people -
their faces sullen and Soviet
turned to tugboats out at ocean
and old loneliness.

That scene was a dimming card
in the light of a projector
blinking into nitrate
and I never turned that hood
to face its operator, framing
the Atlantic in December

as contemplation more
than the spyglass reasons
I would drive 2000 miles
to the end of Maine
to watch pallets and a cooler
bob in the ocean and spin.

Hoping I might find instead
a mermaid with a lobster tail
or some scrimshawed, whalebone Jesus
or my dead friend's voice recorded
on a flash drive in a bottle
dredged from the sea floor
by the mystery of whirlpool mechanics
and tossed ashore spinning
until it pointed out by mouth
my new magnetic North.

Instead, I took a windjammer
into the Bay of Fundy
and saw the Old Sow -
this indefatigable kraken
and listened to this sucking sound

of the swirling tidal depression -
this fantastic black drain
at the tip of America
and old loneliness
recording Eastport.

VARIATIONS ON THE PRAIRIE WISPS AT MINDENIMNES

Far lights
in the night dance
green and yellow, ghostly
auguries above the silent
prairie.

Dancing
lights in the night
mist below Orion
mirroring the glow befallen
angels.

Wonder
in my imprint
and standing in hoof prints
of buffalo sleeping somewhere
circled.

Alone
at equinox
in a moment frozen
between breaths becoming starlight
watching.

Moonlight
as sheen across
low-lying water, far
drawn sweep illuminating past
my field.

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