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A Wintered Mind

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A WINTERED MIND

by

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This dissertation, submitted by Cody James Deitz in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Cody Deitz
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For Ashley

ABSTRACT

A Wintered Mind is a collection of poems that explores the space and place of North Dakota through the eyes of an outsider. Having moved to North Dakota from Southern California, the author's experience is initially one of disorientation and displacement, but through meditative engagement with the landscape and working to understand his place in it, the author finds a place rich in austere beauty. The speaker of these poems turns often to the language of Zen Buddhism, using the North Dakotan landscape as a lens to explore inner geographies. In turn, these inner geographies implicate the reader in their inward movement, generating ontological and epistemological questions that propel these poems in and out of physical space. The title of this dissertation, *A Wintered Mind*, suggests that ultimately the speaker—and by extension the author—is inextricably changed by his time here. The introduction to these poems works to ground them in both the author's personal experience and a Heideggerian framework that investigates the poem's propensity to appear spontaneously, and in doing so, tell the truth.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A Poet Dislodged

What I remember most about the trip was the impenetrable blackness of the Montana night and the feebleness with which our rented truck's high beams pierced the dark. It was a dry night and the mid-July heat had abated only slightly. The windows were cracked to let in the fragrant, grassy air and my brother-in-law, who had accompanied us across-country, snoozed in the passenger seat. The only sounds were the faint whistle of the open windows and the low-rpm hum of the truck's engine. As I drove that dark highway, belonging neither to where I'd come from or where I was going, I felt something shift—like the gears of the world had, almost imperceptibly, clunked forward.

I'm still unsure whether this was the onset of highway hypnosis, considering I'd driven all day and the day before, or a minor moment of genuine transcendence. Whatever it was, I felt the space around me animated with an energy I'd never felt before: a kind of charged emptiness. And against that emptiness I felt changed as a poet, and as a person. It was not quite loneliness or dislocation, though I certainly felt that too; it was something closer to what I imagine the sublime might feel like. It was as if I risked being swallowed up by the emptiness that surrounded me should I let my guard down for too long—that whatever was *me* had encountered something deeper and older than the world I'd known, something unrecognizable. If I had to pick one word, I'd say I felt *dislodged*.

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I realize this might sound a little melodramatic, but in hindsight, I can think of nothing that has more radically affected my work as a poet—both the poems themselves and my ability to compose them—than my move from Southern California to the Upper Midwest. This is largely due to the importance that environment, both space and place, has always played in my work. Ever since I began to write regularly and with intention, I've found the open window to be an endlessly enchanting starting point. As long as I can remember, it's been a pathway out of my own mind and into the world, though it inevitably leads back to an internal world. The world out *there* has always served this dual purpose for me: it's a pathway not just *out* but *in*. Over the years, I've learned that external geographies are so often useful for navigating and mapping internal geographies, and this became increasingly apparent as I wrote my chapbook, *Pressed Against All That Nothing*, which was finished shortly before moving out of California. In it, landscape plays such a central role as to almost be its own character. Even reviewers have commented that the book feels to be as much about the California High Desert as it is about the relationship between the speaker and his brother, which is the book's central tension.

After writing that book, I knew the questions of space and place were important to me, but it took moving away from any semblance of the familiar to make it clear the extent to which my writing practice revolved around them. I did not realize how much in my own mind I was someone *within* something and *against* something—whether that was the canyons and creeks of arroyo country or the cement and glass of downtown Los Angeles. When all that background was stripped away, it became clear how much my environment had influenced and determined my inner world, and that of others, too—that this was one of the central, previously unnamed tenets of my poetry. It took driving across the vast, endless space of the upper Midwest to strip away that ignorance, and that's what it felt like: a kind of baptism in emptiness. The speaker in

an early poem from the collection, “Letter From a Traveler,” even uses that language: “To me, it feels like baptism, / an emptiness that burns in its starkness / and cleans in its burning” (8-10). There was a palpable sense of loss I felt in moving, a stripping away that was tinged with the kind of minor violence I imagine most people feel when making such a move.

But I was also entranced. As I drove the moving truck packed with everything my wife and I owned across the northern Great Plains, I was engrossed by the great expanses of space—the empty barns, the grain silos standing alone in the massive fields, and the shelter belts (whose name I hadn’t yet learned) that seemed to walk off endlessly from the highway. There were certainly some personal and emotional elements of this entrancement: I’d never imagined myself living in the Midwest, least of all the Dakotas. In my mind, it was a primarily place where the great Theodore Roosevelt had spent some time roughing it—and where Lewis and Clark had passed through—but that was about it. I actually imagined it to be relatively wooded, thinking back to pictures of the Black Hills I’d seen. Those who have spent any time in North Dakota, especially its eastern edge, can appreciate how mistaken I was.

So, in relocating, I had run up against a palpable tension. While as a person I felt displaced and destabilized, as a writer I felt irresistibly drawn to the unfamiliar (and perhaps the defamiliar, as it was my perception that made the Midwest-mundane strange) in all the emptiness I saw outside my car window. I knew I’d have to try and approach that experience in my writing. That was, after all, why I’d come to North Dakota. I wondered: what did it mean to be *something* or *someone* against all this empty space? How could this intense feeling of isolation and exposure be captured, their textures mapped in some way? What were the implications of this displacement and destabilization for my writing?

All these questions swirled around me as I settled into the Grand Forks community, and I went to the page every morning in earnest to try and unpack them, but another problem soon arose: I couldn't write. I was blocked, creatively stopped up. Most every morning, I awoke early and sat down to the page to write my way into my experience of North Dakota and got nowhere. Everything I wrote seemed stilted and overwrought. The longer I strained against the cursor and line, the more that feeling returned—the same sense of dislocation that had first crept over me as I drove through the Northern Plains, just with an intensity that repetition had dulled to a tolerable level. As I wrote, it felt like I was trying to impress upon the landscape something foreign to it. I felt very much the outsider, unable to place myself or begin to understand this landscape where I'd never imagined living, despite my interest in the differentness of the space.

Slowly, my mornings became less built around writing and more around trying to write, and after deciding today wasn't the day for writing, slipping off to walk the prairie and find good spots to hunt and fish. Mostly, though, I read. I read poems and short stories, I read about writing, and I read about writer's block. I read whatever advice I could find, and it was all about what you would imagine: just keep writing, don't think; work from such and such exercise to find a starting point; or, more often, just *read*. I dove into Louise Glück's *Proofs and Theories* and reread *Madness, Rack, and Honey* by Mary Ruefle. Throughout many of these essays, especially the less formal ones like Ruefle's, an interesting thread emerged: that poets, in some sense, are ignorant to the mechanism of their creativity. Ruefle's "A Short Lecture on Socrates" sees her reveal that she doesn't *really* know what she's doing—and that other poets feel the same way. She says one of her colleagues summed it up by saying "the difference between myself and a student is that I am better at not knowing what I am doing" (250). Elsewhere, too, this idea emerged. Dennis Cass' "How to Get Unstuck: The Psychology of Writer's Block," which

presents a kind of compressed survey of research on creativity argued that I was probably more capable than I realized—I just had to notice my own patterns. This was deeply appealing to me in its promise of self-efficacy. If only I could be a little more metacognitive, he argued, I could probably overcome my writer's block. As a general argument, it was fair enough. But one line from this essay really stood out to me and still comes to me from time to time. Referring to one of the themes of his previous book, Cass says "that—wonders of the human brain notwithstanding—people generally don't know what the hell they're doing even while they're in the middle of doing it." This was certainly how I felt, and these claims seemed to both comfort me in my inability to write (it was *ok* that I was stuck), but also frustrate me that this inherent ignorance was somehow supposed to be productive. I was waist-deep in the quasi-mysticism of craft criticism and could find little to address the destabilization that had so completely unseated my sense of writerly power. I had not realized how much I was a poet of place and space—and how lost I would feel once that familiar backdrop was pulled away.

So, I plodded along, becoming accustomed to my new school and new surroundings while I kept up my daily writing habit to maintain at least some semblance of familiarity amidst all the new experiences. But unfortunately, I still felt thoroughly stuck. It became clear that I did not understand the dislocation I was feeling, or at least had not yet found a way to approach it.

Beginner's Mind and Wandering into the Grass

As much as our move to the Red River Valley triggered an impasse in my poetry, it also triggered a deepening in my meditation practice, which had before been somewhat less consistent. Though my formal training is composed of only a brief period at the Los Angeles Zen Center, for much of my adult life I've been a regular meditator and student of Zen. By the time

we arrived in Grand Forks, I had been practicing zazen ("seated meditation"—though that's a poor translation) for a few years, and perhaps in some ways as a replacement for my frustrated writing practice, and as a means of combating anxiety more generally, my meditation practice gradually became more serious and the pillar around which I oriented my morning.

Still, I continued to write, if only to stay limber and process my new surroundings in whatever way I could. Over time, my meditation practice and writing practice came together. While on some level I was still trying to write through my block, I'd eased back and focused instead on simply observing and documenting what I was seeing and only tentatively attempting to draw meaning from these new sights and sounds. I remembered Cass's words: "people generally don't know what the hell they're doing even while they're in the middle of doing it." The more regular my meditation practice became, the more Cass's declaration seemed itself informed by Zen. *It's okay to not know what I'm doing—nobody does. Just notice, no ego,* I thought. And over the weeks and months, this process led to some minor success. I seemed at least able to break through the negative, frustrated lens through which I viewed my writerly block. In my own way, I'd managed to cultivate a "beginner's mind," something with which readers of Shunryu Suzuki's classic work *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* might be familiar—it's one of those concepts that seems to have leaked into the broader culture. I had, in other words, gone back to basics; I'd humbled my expectations for sitting down to the page.

In the opening pages of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, where he effectively sums up much of the book's message, Suzuki writes that in the beginner's mind "there are many possibilities" (2). He does not mean only to note that ignorance and inexperience are states of potential—though there's that, too—but that to have a beginner's mind means to approach an activity with a lack of pretense, and by doing this, we can be "always true to ourselves" (2). This beginner's

mind, Suzuki argues, is the essence of Zen: "there is no need to have a deep understanding of Zen," rather, the "real secret of the arts" is to "always be a beginner" (2-3). While it's easy, based on the context of the passage, to read "arts" as the proverbial "art" of practicing Zen, I think Suzuki was quite intentional in his use of the plural. He absolutely meant to argue that this kind of "true" mindset is the key to success in the intentional practice of art—any art, ostensibly. At the core of this belief is the idea of being "true to ourselves," i.e., maintaining correct orientation toward the world to move toward a broader truth (more on this later).

In part consciously and in part unconsciously, I internalized this value and continued to return to the page each morning anew, attempting to simply see where the poem might take me. I worked to remember that zazen is not only sitting down to meditate, but a seated meditation (i.e., a meditative sense *seated* in one's being), and this seemed to ease the pressure just enough to begin writing properly again. The poems resulting from this mindset began almost always as pure observation, simply noticing what I saw—not unlike much Zen and Zen-informed poetry. And as I continued to write these compact observational poems, I found myself quietly aspiring to work like Gary Snyder's "A Dent in a Bucket":

> Hammering a dent out of a bucket
> a woodpecker
> answers from the woods (26)

The sense of purity in poems like this drew me in and prompted numerous questions about how the poem can engage with the natural world—and what the poet's responsibilities were in that engagement to the reader and to himself. More specifically, what caught my eye was the simultaneous lack of investment coupled with a palpable sense of connection in many of these poems. We might say that these speakers (though there isn't much of a speaker at all) are *attuned* to their environment, but that doesn't quite get to it. This apparent contradiction between being

connected while simultaneously unattached was particularly intriguing and something I felt I needed to understand. As I wrote, however, I moved away from this disembodied style and toward a more grounded, "embodied" approach.

I began to slowly regain my writerly confidence, and a shift took place over the weeks and months: the speaker in my poems began to take on increasingly more authority in the space of the poem. The lyrical "I" that had felt so artificial since moving to North Dakota began to sneak back into the lines, a kind of center around which the imagery of a simply observed world was bending. I was no longer satisfied to simply document what stood outside my window—I discovered a speaker that became an actor out in that space with something to gain and something to lose. More than simply *what is out there?*, this re-emergent speaker often seemed to ask, w*hat does this space mean?* And *who am I here?* It seemed that I found a place to tentatively stand against this strange new backdrop.

And thus, what would become *A Wintered Mind* began to take shape with the emergence of one of its core tensions: the tension between observation and attempted meaning-making. More than perhaps anything else, this is the underlying tension that runs throughout the collection. We can see examples of how this tension manifests in various ways, but before we examine things more closely, I feel I should clarify what I mean by "observation." When I use the term "observation" or "pure observation," I do so with knowledge of the theoretical and philosophical implications. Considering especially 20th century phenomenological and existentialist work, we must be careful to acknowledge how subjective apparently "objective" or "observational" perception can be—that we experience any phenomena with inextricable bias and prescribed value. This is not dissimilar from Zen teaching, too, interestingly. Aware of these implications, I use the term "observation" with an eye toward both elements of its etymology and

its Buddhist energies[1]. Etymologically, the Latinate roots of "to tend to" and "to regard" are important, suggesting a focused engagement. And in terms of Buddhist connotation, I'm interested in the term's multi-directional nature: observation can be both inward and outward-facing, while simultaneously resisting a dualistic switching between these. For our purposes, then, "observation" could be roughly synonymous with "detachment" or "non-attachment," though these lack the attentive aspect so important to the approach of these poems—so for these reasons, "to observe" and "observation" feel appropriate. With that understanding, we can explore how this tension between observation and meaning-making actually manifests.

And indeed, the very first poem in the collection works to establish this tension, while also introducing one of the other common themes of the collection—traveling, or more specifically, driving, which North Dakotans do a lot. In "Mantra for Late-Night Driving," the speaker navigates the space between noticing and trying to understand what he notices:

> Driving summer-dry roads
> in the Montana night,
> blacker than a dreamless sleep,
>
> the void of space hanging lower
> than I've ever seen it.
>
> What I'm driving toward or what I'm driving away from—
> caught between significances.
>
> All I see is the present
> glut of emptiness and whatever
> beauty
>
> with which it might be endowed. (ll. 1-9)

[1]Interestingly, the Buddhist concept of *kanjin,* as least as taught by Nichiren Diashonin, means to observe one's own mind. The kanji for the term (觀心) translates roughly to "consciousness" ("observation of the mind"). Visit the Nichiren Buddhism Library website for a more detailed discussion.

The poem begins in medias res, making the speaker—the lens through which the experience is filtered—implied rather than established directly. And the speaker doesn't appear until indirectly in line 4[2], just before the transition from observation to positioning the speaker abstractly between origin and destination. Thus, this speaker exists in a kind of liminal space: in one sense very much the origin of the thinking mind and voice of the poem, but also simultaneously created by the geography and action—and there's a subtle pushing/pulling relationship between these entities (if we can imagine them as such) that tends to move the poem forward. This is one of those energies that seemed to emerge spontaneously from the poem, not something I intentionally worked out, a phenomenon we'll discuss later in more detail.

One especially interesting manifestation of this tension is in the apparently contradictory image of the "glut of emptiness," where it is only the speaker's perception that assigns an abundance to a thing that is itself non-being, i.e., emptiness. And even this exists in a state of potential, characterized by "whatever beauty with which it might be endowed." We see here the speaker's vision/perception as the source of the imagery, but also the image's resistance to be named, to be known. Even in this minor example, we see this theme of observation versus meaning-making emerge. Ultimately, the urge to make meaning from experience is frustrated in this poem, and the speaker (and we) can only look on:

> Just the present—
>
> this shortened exhalation, the humming
> of the warm tires on the asphalt,
>
> dim headlights brushing the roadside trees
> like a fleeting, tired thought—
> just this. (ll. 9-14)

[2] Note that I do not count breath extensions (the line portions that do not align with the left margin) as their own line, but rather part of the previous line. Bear this in mind when referring to lines by number.

The speaker's urge to make sense of his experience writ large is frustrated by, among other things, the immediacy of that experience; he is left able only to observe. However, notice he is unable to resist connecting the simple observation to the act of thinking—the "dim headlights brushing the roadside trees / like a fleeting, tired thought." The final breath extension of the poem—"just this"—ends up pointing both at the briefly sketched driving scene and the tentative connection made the simile. The observation and the ambiguous "fleeting, tired thought" are made equivalent.

Here, we see the attempt to make meaning overcome by the Zen-informed discipline of non-attached observation, as opposed to the balance we find in earlier lines. Much like I felt as I drove across the Northern Plains, this speaker is, at least in some way, swallowed up by the present asserting itself. The speaker has no response for the "present / glut of emptiness," while the "beauty with which it might be endowed" is left in a conditional tense, unknown. Admittedly, the tension between a Zen-informed noticing and the speaker's attempt to make meaning is subtle and indirect in this opening poem, but I hope it successfully establishes this tension and the imposing power of landscape in the broader collection.

In other poems, too, the Zen-inflected path I took to return to the page and its attendant tension between observation and meaning-making are apparent. In several poems, this tension becomes quite explicit—becoming the direct object of the speaker's investigation. One such poem is "September Metaphysics," where the speaker ventures that

> Late fall afternoon feels always like a question
> I can't put my finger on:
>
> something about the living and the dead,
> a counting towards the unknown.
>
> It feels mysterious—the space between things,
> the way the light plays interstitial. (ll. 1-6)

Where it might be advantageous in some way to shy away from such abstraction, especially early in the poem, the speaker ventures forth, naming the "question" as far as he can name it. Here, we see the urge to make meaning overtake the Zen-informed observation; instead of simply observing (though the poem is nearly static in some ways), the speaker allows the images to become animated—or enchanted, even—by assigning them a certain weight and power from that first moment, by not shying away from subjectifying the images. The late afternoon is not simply what it is; it becomes what it *feels* like. And even when what it feels like remains slippery and indistinct, it is charged with a seriousness that comes from attempting in earnest to know something, to understand something. That earnestness is key—the real intention to seek and discover, rather than setting up some poetic trope, is what breathes life into the thing.

Over time, these tensions between observing and meaning-making continued to animate my work, and I moved further from the purely meditative space and the observational poetry that had helped pull me out of my rut. As I grew more aware of this shift in purpose and technique, it became clear that these poems were, as a whole, quite different from most of what I'd written before, and certainly different from the poems in *Pressed Against All That Nothing*, whose purpose was primarily to document. The difference, I would later realize, was that I was (and am) using the space of the poem to try and understand my experiences in a manner that was much more direct than in my previous poems. The muteness that had resulted from my encounter with North Dakota and its strange, foreign geography was me being essentially dumbfounded, confused, and lost—and my strategy for becoming at least less confused was to first observe, and then ask questions: what does this space *do*? What does this space *mean*? How does it mean? I am using the poem, in other words, to ask questions, and not as a rhetorical device, but in

earnest. I'm invoking the poem as process. Or, to put it another way, I am using the poem to *think*.

Other poets work in similar modes, and one in particular, Charles Wright, does it exceptionally well. More so than many of the poets I've read while working on these poems, I feel as if I'm in conversation with Wright—not exactly in a thematic way (though that does happen from time to time), but in terms of process. To me, he seems to be a master of the poetic mode in which I've found myself so invested. The titular poem from his 2002 collection *A Short History of the Shadow* is an illustrative example of this exploratory, "thinking" poem, and one that I think is helpful to unpack a little here, as it effectively models so much of where my interests are in *A Wintered Mind*. In this poem, Wright begins by placing the reader simultaneously in a chronological moment (though lacking any other clear point of reference) and an abstract space:

> Thanksgiving, dark of the moon.
> Nothing down here in the underworld but vague shapes and black holes,
> Heaven resplendent but virtual
> Above me,
> Trees stripped and triple-wired like Welsh harps. (ll. 1-4)

The work of that immediate juxtaposition of signifiers so effectively *grabs* the reader: "Thanksgiving, dark of the moon." That initial signifier, stripped of all context and pressed to the very start of the line, is further defamiliarized by the (almost) adjective phrase "dark of the moon." The line is stated so matter-of-factly, and we're unsure how these two are meant to be linked—the comma being an ambiguous piece of punctuation that nonetheless produces an interesting resonance.

And as we move through the first lines, we can begin to place ourselves more concretely: we're beneath "Heaven" and "trees stripped bare and triple-wired like Welsh harps." It's not

exactly a precise location, but one that comes to form an image via an almost free-associative quality. More so than a poem from, say, Jorie Graham or Louise Glück, who both explore somewhat abstractly with some free-associative techniques (and whose work I admire), the connective tissue of Wright's poem seems more apparent; the energy and movement of his process are more evident in the final product of the poem, where he might as easily tuck away the syntactic and cognitive seams. Moreover, it's clear the lines build on one-another toward some end that's not initially clear to the reader—nor are they known to Wright, either, I'd wager. We do, in "A Short History of the Shadow," return to the moon, though it is by means of an intratextual transformation. I'll avoid breaking it up too much and simply provide the last section in its entirety:

> No ledge in early December either, and no ice,
> La Niña unhosing the heat pump
> up from the Gulf,
> Orange Crush sunset over the Blue Ridge,
> No shadow from anything as evening gathers its objects
> And eases into earshot.
>
> Under the influx the outtake,
> Leon Battista Alberti says,
> Some lights are from stars, some from the sun
> And moon, and other lights are from fires.
> The light from the stars makes the shadow equal to the body.
> Light from fire makes it greater,
> There, under the tongue, there, under the utterance. (ll. 31-40)

Wright's speaker gathers images while moving chronologically toward the year's end (having moved from November to December), and ultimately, the ending seems uncertain. But the method by which the speaker finds this end, such as it is, is perhaps more interesting: we see the speaker reaching back to previous images to try and find a way out of the darkness. The lights from the stars echo heaven's resplendence; the poem makes the shadows, the "vague shapes and

black holes," of the underworld equal to the body as the poem makes its final turn toward its discovery: what has been performing this movement is language itself, which is in turn made greater.

I turn to this poem in such detail because it shows so clearly a lesson I learned as I worked on *A Wintered Mind*. In its construction and its movement, Wright's poem reads like a striving toward some unknown thing, just on the edge of consciousness. It does more than mimic thought or exploration; it embodies thought. This poem effectively *thinks* toward some ontological truth that remains ultimately concealed, though perhaps less so. And more than that, this poem is, among other things, about poetry itself—about language. This poem reveals an important connection between thinking and language that functions in a uniquely powerful way in poetry. At least in some ways, the poem *is* thought; poetry *is* thinking. This is what Charles Wright's work makes clear, and what I've learned as I worked on these poems: in the midst of the writing process, I am using the poem to think—ideally toward some ontological truth.

I appreciate how abstract this sounds. What does it mean, after all, for a poem to think? And toward truth, no less? At the very least, it smacks of a mysticism that's so often tied up with discussions of poetry and craft. As much as this mysticism can act as a barrier to entry for some, I believe there's something to be gleaned from that mysticism—something I've experienced as a practicing poet that can be teased out in a hopefully less opaque, less mysterious way (though mystery, as we'll soon discover, is an integral part of the process). To better understand what it means for a poem to think, we might start by understanding a bit more about thinking, at least insofar as it concerns poetry. There are numerous poets and thinkers that have explored these intersections, but the one to whom contemporary poets and craft critics disproportionality turn is Martin Heidegger.

Those familiar with Heidegger's work, especially the lectures he gave near the end of his career, likely understand why those invested in questions of craft might be interested, but as far as 20th century philosophers go, Heidegger is certainly not unproblematic. As a philosopher and teacher, he often expressed anti-Semitic views and was an official member of the Nazi party before the war. He never officially denounced this affiliation, though reportedly near the end of his life he admitted in private that his connection to the Nazi party was something he deeply regretted (Petzet 37). Perhaps more troubling than his lack of apology, though, is the complete absence of any commentary or discussion of the Holocaust and the other atrocities carried out by Hitler's regime. Considering Heidegger's investment in historicity in *Being in Time* and in his work in general, it's difficult to imagine his silence in response to the Holocaust is anything but a conscious ideological choice. While we certainly can't ignore these dark aspects of Heidegger's legacy, it remains true that his work has left an indelible mark on various fields of study, including more recently the areas of poetry and craft criticism.

Several contemporary critics have worked to explore Heidegger's work to understand its particular appeal to poets, and one of the clearest of these readings is Tim Mayers' in *(Re)Reading Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*. Mayers argues that while there are a number of reasons why Heidegger might appeal to poets and craft critics alike, the primary reason is probably that "Heidegger saw poetry as cultural and ontologically valuable—even more valuable than science, since poetry's realm is less limited than that of science" (74). It's no secret that, as a field of study, English has often struggled with its perceived rigor amongst other disciplines, and while poetry has experienced something of a scholarly renaissance (if the proliferation of MFA programs and small poetry presses is an indicator in genuine interest rather than profit diversification), it has often suffered from being

seen as a luxurious, non-essential area of study. Heidegger combats this view in his foundational assertion that poetry's lens is both greater in scope and depth than it first appears—that it has something to teach us about the nature of life as we live it, rather than simply what can be measured.

Another reason for Heidegger's popularity Mayers identifies is the way his work "enables broad-based inquiries into the relationship between poetry and technology" and the ways in which these inquiries "seem particularly urgent as technological developments such as the Internet transform, day by day, the condition of language use" (74). What's most surprising in this regard is how prescient Heidegger's work in this intersection between poetry and technology remains after some 70 years. While many of his examples (as we'll soon see) live squarely in the 20th century, it's not obvious that his arguments would radically change if they were offered today. Arguably, Heidegger remains an important voice in this discussion because he focuses less on the technology itself and more on our relationship to it. And further, he investigates how this relationship impacts us. This focus on the essential quality of things and its relationship to us (and this attention used as a way to understand poetry, of all things) is what draws many poets in.

Perhaps the most significant reason Heidegger's work maintains its intrigue for contemporary poets and craft critics—the reason his ideas are still worth engaging with today—is his ability to distill down some core elements of the writing process, and more specifically the subjective experience of that process. Unlike other theorists, namely his phenomenological predecessor Hegel, Heidegger seems able to build an understanding of poetry not tied so directly to its formal or even performative qualities; he attempts instead to start at the poet's experience and work outward. Essentially, this is the approach taken by most contemporary poets and craft critics: focusing on process rather than product. So, to engage with the contemporary discussion

of craft in poetry essentially means to engage, however indirectly or critically, with Heidegger. This, I think, is the most significant reason for his continued popularity among poets, though there's also something to be said for the frequently esoteric style his of his work and the potential appeal of working to untangle its various threads (poets like puzzles, it turns out). Ultimately, Heidegger seems to speak to poets in their own language, and, despite his deeply troubling political views and the criticism he draws, he has something interesting to offer our discussion of the thinking poem—and we can start by digging into the interesting relationship between technology and poetry.

How a Poem Thinks

In the first lectures he gave after being permitted to return to the academy following the end of the Second World War, Heidegger attempted to deconstruct the act of thinking and understand its essential qualities. He did this by working through a few concepts and concerns he saw as integrally related to thinking—or, to put it another way, concepts whose relationship to truth revealed something important about the act of thinking. As one might guess from the aforementioned reasons for Heidegger's continued relevance, technology and poetry are common threads that run throughout many of these lectures. The broader subjects of these talks ranged from thinking itself, such as in those later translated and collected in *What Is Called Thinking?*, to those engaged indirectly with the question of thought, such as the essay "The Question Concerning Technology." Regardless of the particular approach, Heidegger always seems to returns to these various threads, attempting to work out what each tells us about the fundamental experience of thinking.

As mentioned previously, part of Heidegger's appeal to poets and critics is the attention he pays to the relationship between poetry and technology. Part of this intrigue is the way in which Heidegger characterizes technology and reorients us in relation to it. His main concern here, he says, is that the ways in which we incorporate technology into our lives have disappeared; we're no longer fully aware of how technology pervades and alters our world. We've come to confuse, he thinks, what technology *is* with what it *does* ("The Question Concerning Technology" 4). Heidegger's discussion of technology is important for us here because it helps to reveal aspects of the relationship between thinking, Being[3], and truth, and through this process, perhaps it makes sense to ask, somewhat rhetorically, what technology is.

If we are asked to define "technology," we'd likely say it is computers and robotics and so on, and some would probably say technology is also the processes that create these objects. Heidegger says this is fundamentally wrong: "technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology" ("The Question Concerning Technology" 4). He clarifies: "when we are seeking the essence of 'tree,' we have to become aware that That which pervades every tree, as tree, is not itself a tree…likewise, the essence of technology is by no means anything technological" (4). Our inability to make this distinction is problematic not only because it's "wrong," but because how we (mis)understand technology, in Heidegger's view, risks blocking off "the potential for humans to grasp their own actual relationships to technology" (Mayers 70). That is, our inability to understand the essence of technology necessarily obscures our relation to it, moving us further away from truth—which is Heidegger's primary concern. To attempt to locate truth, after all, is the goal of thinking to begin with.

[3] I make 'Being' a proper noun to be specific and invoke Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, but I also understand the relative unimportance of unpacking his concept in depth here. We might just as easily think of 'Being' as 'being-in-the-world,' or the uniquely human experience of existing in the world.

"Truth," of course, is a term that requires some contextualization and elaboration. To specify more precisely what he means by truth, he does what many philosophers do: he borrows a word from another language whose connotative power helps defamiliarize and recalibrate our sense of the concept. Rather than "truth," Heidegger offers the Greek term *aletheia*, which he translates as "unconcealment." In its essence, Heidegger argues, technology performs this function—it is a "mode of revealing" ("The Question Concerning Technology" 13). But it's not all utilitarian efficiency; technology's ability to reveal that which is hidden also tends to dominate the interpretive landscape. When this mode dominates, it tends to drive "out every other possibility of revealing" ("The Question Concerning Technology" 27). In other words, the view of the world that we derive from technology tends to crowd out other interpretive modes—it forces us to see the world in a very specific and singular way. More specifically, we develop the habit of seeing things in the world in terms of what *function* they can serve or what problem they can solve, and we suffer in this unidimensional view.

To illustrate his point, Heidegger uses the example of a hydroelectric plant on the Rhine River. By acting as a source of power by way of the power plant, the river ceases to be a river *in its essence* and is instead something "ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand" ("The Question Concerning Technology" 17). The river, like other things made purposive and transformed by technology, becomes the "standing-reserve," its real nature hidden away by its utility. The danger implied here is "that eventually human beings will come to conceive of everything, including themselves *only* as standing-reserve" (Mayers 70). The problem with technology, at least insofar as we're concerned here, amounts to its innate reductive tendency—in this case, in its tendency to reduce even us to a state of "standing-reserve," to purposive objects. Remember, this is not only problematic because it's myopic, but largely because it's not

true; this mode of interpretation does not fully and appropriately bring the world "out of concealment."

There are, of course, other modes of truth, other modes of "unconcealing"—and here is where the contrast between technology and poetry is important. Whereas "the essence of technology brings things out of concealment, to set them in order for future use, to reveal them as standing-reserve," one such other mode allows things to "be brought out of concealment to stand 'as they are,' or in their own Being" (Mayers 71). This mode, to which Heidegger assigns the term "*poiesis*," is found primarily in art and, more specifically in these lectures, poetry. The primary difference between these two modes of truth, arguably, is that one seeks to reduce opacity in the service of some other end (to transform things in their essence to standing-reserve, that we may use them as tool) while the other is in service of revealing things as they are. Ultimately, technology is intimately related to poetry in that both work to *essentially* reveal Being—though they do so in radically and importantly different ways. Understanding the difference between those two modes, such as they are, can tell us something about poetry and how the poem "thinks" toward truth.

If we look a little closer, a brief look at the terms Heidegger uses to describe these two modes yields more interesting textures in their divergent meanings. *Aletheia* (or ἀλήθεια) comes from two words: from ἀ ("not") and λήθω ("I am hidden"). We can read it somewhat literally as "I am not hidden" or, more simply, "revealed." By contrast, *poiesis* (or ποίησις) is the abstraction of ποιέω ("I make"), making it essentially "a making," "creation," or perhaps the act itself, "creating." Though both terms effectively embody the connotative essence of "truth" that Heidegger's interested in, *aletheia* is positioned as an objective state while *poiesis* implies a far more active, subjective experience. Both terms embody a kind of thinking (or a revealing of

Being, to use Heidegger's language) in that they're making some discovery, but *poiesis* implies a more complex relationship between the thinker and language—and more specifically, an active process or craft-oriented relationship. In this, Heidegger argues, thinking and poetry share much in common.

Naturally, the relationship between thinker/poet and language is complex, but Heidegger has a talent for memorable analogy, which he employs to help clarify. This particular analogy is that of cabinetmaking as a metaphor for thinking. In *What is Called Thinking?*, he defends this cabinetmaking analogy as particularly apt because "the common usage of the word 'craft' is restricted to human activities of that sort. However—it was specifically noted that what maintains and sustains even this handicraft is not the mere manipulation of tools, but the relatedness to wood" (23). That is, the "craft" of thinking/writing demands more than simply learning the methods or developing heuristics; it requires developing a relationship with the proverbial wood, with the *material* of language. Poetry, he says, bears much the same relationship to the notion of craft, and Mayers frames it nicely: "the poet's craft, from this perspective, not only entails the manipulation of linguistic 'tools' like meter and rhyme but extends also into the poet's relationship to language" (71). Herein lies an important parallel between thinking and poetry in their connection between process and material—a way in which the material is allowed (or perhaps *must*) determine the thinker's/poet's relationship to language. Heidegger argues—and this again is in large part why his work is of such interest to me and to poets in general—that, contrary to the "common view…that both thought and poesy use language merely as a medium and means of expression…thought and poesy are in themselves the originary, the essential, and therefore also the final speech that language speaks through the mouth of man. To speak language is totally different from employing language" (*What is Called*

Thinking? 128). Notice the shift that takes place: thought and poesy are "the final speech that *speaks language through the mouth of man*." Language is not a tool to be manipulated by the poet; the poet is a medium through which language speaks. And in this odd sort of self-energizing, language exists in poetry as an end in and of itself.

We can frame things more clearly by returning to our initial binary in technology versus art as respective modes of truth (or at least as modes of revealing truth). Regular, everyday language, what Heidegger calls "common speech" (128), is a vehicle for the technological mode of thinking. In common speech, we "employ terms" rather than "speak words" (128). In an effort to accomplish some other goal, everyday language can in itself become the standing-reserve. By contrast, the poet does not use language but allows himself to *be used* by language—he resists the urge to allow language to remain utilitarian and instead become animated through his voice. The poet becomes the medium for *poiesis*, for creation.

If this view seems reminiscent of the Romantic view of the poet and artist—that's because it is, or at least there are some notable connections. In the Romantic view, the poet is merely a vessel for genius or inspiration through which the muses speak. Despite how frequently this view is problematized and viewed as generally unfashionable in the creative writing world, it has remained in the collective imagination. In part, I think this is because we want to assume the great accomplishments of exceptional artists were always out of reach to us (so as not to see our own limitations in such high definition). But if we're being honest, it has also hung around because it contains a morsel of truth. We see it evidenced in most major poetic movements since the Romantics—even by the modernists, who reworked numerous artforms to comment on the suddenly Modern world. Eliot's poetic ideal of the poet as conduit by which "a new thing" results from the "concentration" of events and recollections, as he tentatively outlines in

"Tradition and the Individual Talent," is a well-known example (119). It's not necessarily surprising that Eliot, perhaps the most personally and aesthetically traditional of the high-modernist poets, would hold some Romantic views, but it remains interesting to see this idea live on through his craft essays. It's clear he's tuned into something fundamental about the poetic experience that transcends the cultural and stylistic currents of the particular moment.

However, we should be clear: Heidegger does not seem to be advocating for the poet as a passive vehicle, but rather that the poet (like the thinker) must actively resist the naturalized, commonplace way of viewing language as merely a means to an end. Mayers' reading positions Heidegger view as sharing little with the Romantics. He says that "for Heidegger, the poet is not an autonomous genius, a dispenser of wisdom and insight. Instead, the poet is a craftsperson, one who learned the difficult art of listening to language and not forcing language to submit to intention" (72). While it's difficult to argue, as Mayers does, that Heidegger's view of the poet is separated almost entirely from a Romantic ethos, it is clear that Heidegger's focus is on the active component of the process. As he theorizes the act of thinking as being caught in a "draft" or "wake" of a thought that recedes before the thinker, he's careful to emphasize that the thinker is not merely carried along but instead "*points* toward that which withdraws. *As* he is pointing that way, man *is* the pointer" (*What is Called Thinking?* 9, emphasis in original). There's a clearly active role, then, the poet must play in his relation to language, even if that is, at least in some capacity, more of a resistance to the dominant, "technological" mode of thought. An important part of the poet's work involves a letting go, a deferral to language—but it's fair to ask: where is the craft in that? If this resistance to the commonplace, technological mode of language is paired with a particular kind of letting go, what is the poet actually doing in this process?

Perhaps the Truth Depends on a Walk Around a Lake

Because it's wrapped up in our ideas of inspiration, writerly autonomy, and craft, the question of what is ultimately within the poet's power throughout the writing process has always lingered in the background of these conversations. Distilled down, this is essentially the debate over inspiration: how much control does the poet have over the writing process? How much control *should* the poet have? This is the question, to return to Heidegger's analogy, of the poet's "relatedness to wood." In his 1993 essay "Eating the Angel, Conceiving the Sun," Sherod Santos works to break open this question of writerly power within a broader conversation about poetry, thinking, and the mystery of the writing process. In my reading, he puts forth two main claims that are of interest to us here. The first, working from Heidegger's assertion, is that thinking fits more appropriately in the realm of poetry (*poiesis*) than in the realm of science (*aletheia*). More importantly, though, he makes explicit the target toward which the poet aims; he argues that the *object* of thought is that which is "unthinkable." His second claim is that poetry has a stubborn, innate tendency to tell the truth. This idea is bound up in the "unthinkable" object of thought—and helpful in understanding the elements of the poetic process we're interested in. I'd like to unpack each of these claims, but what's most revealing is where these claims intersect, and where we can see this intersection in some more poems from *A Wintered Mind*.

Santos presents his first claim by working from Heidegger's assertion of the integral relationship between thinking and poetry. He effectively sums up much of the discussion we've explored from Heidegger's lectures but then goes further, focusing on the importance of the *object* of thought: "science doesn't think…pure thinking lies closer in fact to the ground of poetry, and…the only thing worth thinking about is what is truly unthinkable" (53). The

"unthinkable" to Heidegger, and by extension, Santos, is that which we do not or cannot know—that which *resists* our thinking. After all, if our thinking is in the service of unconcealment, an attempt to reveal things in their own Being (i.e., as they are), then we're bound to pursue that which is hidden.

The concept of the unthinkable, as Santos presents it, offers an additional angle of approach into our effort to understand what's happening when the poet sits down to write (and is himself *written*). It certainly helped provide a framework for the place I found myself as I found my way through these poems—the fact that I was there, writing, didn't lead to immediate revelations about the current in which I was caught. What, after all, is happening when we are moved to write a poem? How does the poet's "relatedness to wood" manifest? In many cases, it seems what's interesting is not what we as poets know or do, but what is brought forth by the poem itself. "At what level," Santos asks, "is it consciously determined what that poem will think about? And when, in advance, you already have a 'subject' in mind, what does it mean, as so often happens, when the poem insists, through the countervailing logic of its images and sounds, on diverting the poem in another direction altogether?" (53-54). To say this "so often happens" is, in fact, an understatement. I've certainly had this experience, but even a casual glance through craft literature shows poet after poet discussing the strange phenomenon of poems asserting their own agenda or diverting from the course they envisioned. We can find this even in Wallace Stevens' prose. Discussing his poem "The Old Woman and the Statue," he says "while there is nothing automatic about the poem, nevertheless it has an automatic aspect in the sense that it is what I wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though I knew before it was written what I wanted to do" (519). This is an example of what Stevens calls the "irrational element," a part of the "poetic mechanism" that resides in

every poet. This is not a special sensibility, exactly—that which might allow the poet, a la Wordsworth, to recollect in tranquility what had powerfully overtaken him. Rather, it is an ability to allow incongruity and the "irrational" to direct the process from the start.

And Stevens is certainly not alone in his acknowledgement of this "irrational element." More contemporary discussions of this phenomenon reveal how common the experience is. Considering how little we seem to understand about this apparently automatic element of the process, Mark Strand wonders whether we can even begin to analyze it properly. He argues that "discussions of craft are at best precarious. We know only afterwards what it is we have done" (456). Here and throughout the larger body of craft criticism, there's a sense that the act of composing poetry effectively transports the poet. If there is an established intention or deliberate agenda, it's generally overpowered by the poem's own energy when the poet is wise enough to allow that energy to do its work.

Much of the discussion borders conspicuously on the realm of psychology, so it's no surprise that Strand invokes Carl Jung, to whom other poets have also turned to help validate or contextualize their experiences. Jung was obviously no stranger to the creative process; he writes, "as long as we ourselves are caught up in the process of creation, we neither see nor understand; indeed we ought not to understand, for nothing is more injurious to immediate experience than cognition." (456). Here again is the careful differentiation between immediacy and cognition—and the more one digs into essays on craft, the more this distinction appears. There is a multitude of ways to describe the experience, whether it be Heidegger's *poeisis* or Strand's knowledge-only-in-hindsight, but regardless of the particular language, the experience remains the same: the poem emerges not when the poet wills it into being, but when the poet *allows* it to emerge.

To get back to the question, then, of what poets actively *do* as they write—what we do to nudge the poem's proverbial rudder in one direction or another—the honest answer seems to be *not very much*. But in what little control we have over the process, we must, as Santos suggests, think the "unthinkable"; we must pursue those questions for which we genuinely have no answer, resisting contrivance as much as is possible. I can only speak with any kind of certainty for myself and my own process, but I feel confident in saying the poems that have become *A Wintered Mind* emerged, as much as anything else, from a state of displacement and uncertainty—and they only emerged with an intentional decision to inquire and to listen carefully to what tensions emerged from the speaker's encountering the Other. It's really a matter of attempting to get out of my own way. I've always liked the way that Heather McHugh puts it in the preface to her collected volume, *Hinge and Sign: Poems, 1968-1993*. She says she has a fundamental ability to listen before she speaks: "a gift for listening to language before I make it listen to me" (xiv-xv). While I might not claim such a gift for myself, I certainly work to let the poem make the first move once I've set off in a general direction. The goal is to listen, but at least in my process, listening follows inquiry. It's helpful, I think, to look at some lines in more detail.

This inquiry, if we can think of it as such, tends to take on slightly different forms. In some poems, it's quite explicit: many of the poems end with implied or even literal questions. "October in Fragments" is one such poem, and begins, in many ways, as a simple sketch of incoming autumn in the Red River Valley:

> Autumn in the Red River Valley
> arrives with its own kind of humility—
>
> Draped in his mist-clothes, the morning sun
> looks a neon moon: bone-white paper lantern

glowing behind clouds winded by some northern grassland (ll. 1-5)

As effective as these opening lines may or may not be in setting the tone for what comes later, they were actually written much later in the process. This poem really began as a made thing with one of its later discoveries, which arrives in what would become the end of its third section. This discovery is an inversion of the conventional way we imagine autumn. Instead of being a time for harvest and things dying away, it's simply a different kind of emergence. The speaker declares:

But autumn is not the dying season,

it turns out, not the season of decay.
No—it is the birth and bright unfurling

of nothingness (ll. 40-43)

In hindsight, the early work of this inversion is clear in the opening lines' morning sun appearing as a moon, but the poem really began, at least in its initial image, as a meditation on the beauty in a tree's opening up as its leaves are shed—the way that more of the autumn sun is let through as the days and weeks wear on. Rather than focusing on what is being lost, the eye is turned toward what is allowed to fill that new space. In this case, this is "nothingness," but more importantly, it is the speaker's sense of himself (and by extension, the collective "we" of the poem) and the way that perception is changed by this nothingness. Autumn is the season, the poet says, "when it's easier to be human, / easier to be *something* against so stark a background" (ll. 43-44). This reorientation was essentially the genesis of the poem, and what drives many of its images.

To break things down a little further in regard to process, this poem began as an investigation in two parts: what is interesting about this image of a tree losing its leaves and why does autumn seem to have, at least to me, such a strange affect (it has always arrived with a unique sense of relief)? These are obviously surface questions and concerns, but the underlying

questions began to emerge as the poem took shape—questions about how our collective impermanence is both mirrored by and contrasted with the changing of the seasons or about how our natural environment plays a role in our sense of self/identity. These questions, like virtually all instances of a poem being explained in prose, are not nearly as interesting. What is interesting is what happened in the poem as it took shape—as I worked to practice the discipline, as McHugh says, to "keep finding life strange" (xv).

Despite my attempts to push this poem in one direction or another, or to incorporate lines that later came to me as potential inclusions, this poem seemed to have a will of its own. So much of it simply *emerged* as I continued morning after morning and week after week to pursue these images/questions. I was surprised, for example, to see my old dog Sam appear in the poem. There were many earlier versions where there was no mention of him, but one morning, probably a few months after he'd died, there he was. His appearance actually became an important hinge between two of the poem's key images/themes: the leaves in the grass and death. And perhaps more importantly, it became *his* death rather than an abstraction, concretizing what risked fading into vague poetic gesturing. I was surprised, too, by the cast-off leaves becoming "apertures through which we might glimpse / something of ourselves, something eternal—" (ll. 24-25). In an autumnal poem, leaves are to be expected, but the way in which they became this center around which certain pieces of the poem revolved was an interesting surprise.

In each of these instances, something *asserted* itself as I continued to pursue the poem—these elements were discovered and revealed, not slotted in by me. We can even see some resistance to their appearance in the speaker; in considering what we might see in those leaves-made-aperture, he says "but perhaps that's too grandiose," (l. 26). There's a palpable mistrust in

the emergence of that image, almost a jadedness in response to the validity of such big claims. But still, the speaker seems to sense some truth in the interplay between the parts:

> It makes you think, though: what swatch of color
> is made by the present settling into the past? (ll. 27-28)

Like in so many of these poems, meaning (or truth, if we can be so bold) proves slippery and indistinct, appearing not with certainty but in shades. Or, in this particular case, not appearing at all—at least not with any kind of recognizable finality. *Is* this the color "made by the present settling into the past?" We can't be sure. There's no one to offer us a certain answer and no way ready-made way to seek it out ourselves. Indeed, even in the end of the poem, what's emphasized is not what's findable by peering into those metaphorical eyes, but what resists our urge to understand:

> When I walk close enough to the trees
> to feel small, to peer down into the apertures
>
> their leaves make in the grass, nothing looks back.
> Nothing stares back at me. That's something
> of a kindness, isn't it? (ll. 45-48)

I knew, once those fallen leaves had appeared in the poem and had taken on some symbolic energy, having been transformed by the associative power of the poem into apertures, the speaker would have to eventually look down into them. There was just no way to avoid confronting the symbol, and I honestly didn't know what he would find, but, like the speaker, I was a little surprised to find, well, nothing. In this poem, of course, "nothing" is everything—it's charged with its own unique energy. And the speaker's final question, his subjectifying of the silence, reveals a lot about the poem's center: in the end, it's a question of our relationship to emptiness, to the unknown. This question and its attendant tension remain in some sense unsatisfying (and this dissatisfaction and fragmentation are even reflected in the larger structure

of the poem). The implied upward inflection of that final breath extension echoes hollowly, unanswered and unknown.

We must ask: is this the unthinkable cutting off the possibility for meaning? What is the speaker searching for? In various ways, the speaker seems to be searching for himself, but not exactly in a solipsistic way. He's searching for something fundamentally human—he hopes to "glimpse / something of ourselves, something eternal—." In the end, though, he is held back by some sense of humility or embarrassment, even. "But perhaps that's too grandiose," he says. This seems to be the very definition of "unthinkable": the object of the speaker's pursuit continually frustrated, even in the end. This unthinkable, according to Santos, is ultimately the unthinkable or unknowable in ourselves. For him, "poetry is a discourse in which a 'self' attempts to think back to its own construction…in the complex web of language, experience, and ideology. But this origin can never be thought exactly, since it always recedes from the poet who pursues it" (Mayers 77).

The unthinkable, then, appears to be *it*—the thing we know as poets as we sit down to write. It's the unknowable thing whose wake we chase across the page, the thought on the edge of thought. As has probably become obvious, the unthinkable for me manifests most often as a question—or as the illegible answer to that question. Again and again, the speaker of these poems finds messages that he cannot read. When he encounters an ephemeral coyote in "Letter from the Snowfields," the response he hears is an "illegible answer." The landscape itself even contains languages that are always almost intelligible, like in "Winter Lines":

> a rabbit's cursive tracks in the white—
>
> in and out and into the thin timber in a language
> I'm still learning to read, a dialect that's all impression. (ll. 8-10)

We see in these moments the unthinkable pressing back against the speaker—most often requiring the speaker to ease back, as the speaker does in "Winter Lines." In response to this illegible language, he can only guess at what it might mean. For this speaker, the answer seems to be slowing down and noticing. "Watching and not asking is what it asks us to do:" he declares, "zazen wrapped up / in a down jacket and hat, hands tucked deep into our pockets, feet still" (ll. 11-12). Whether we can see in these moments a self attempting to "think back to its own construction," I'm not sure. We lose so much by distilling this pursuit of the unthinkable down to *who am I?* or *where do I come from?*. Instead, this pursuit seems very much like an engagement with the present.

Remember the term Heidegger assigns to the mode of truth at work in the artistic process: *poesis*, creation. Rather than the poet-self attempting to "think back to its own construction," the poet can *reveal* himself in language through the act of making—by engaging with the world around him, he can locate himself in that world. *This* is what the process truly feels like to me. The poem is the act of creating or revealing the self—in a particular time and place, and in the present moment—through language: it's a kind of *autopoiesis*, a self-making. This is where the power of the poem lies: in its provision of a vehicle through which language can pursue the unknown with as few restraints as possible, and, when everything goes right, find meaning. This, to turn finally to Santos' second claim, is poetry's "stubborn, inborn, implausible resolve to tell the truth…however insufferable the telling may be" (60). It's difficult to point to some poem in this collection as proof of this claim, though perhaps that in itself is a kind of proof. The truth, after all, usually can't be pointed at and even then, may not be what we want to hear.

If we turn to these poems and ask more directly what truth emerges, we find few equally direct answers. Like the speaker of these poems, who asks in "Letter from the Homesick,"

what truth grows out in those fields, what's made by this earth

and this sky, the wind just says *yes*
as it runs past me into the dark. (ll. 18-21)

The truth arrived at in these poems, such as it is, is subtle—and found, I think, in how so many of these poems end. As I reread this collection during the revision process, I was surprised at how many of the poems end in a settling, a coming to rest. There's movement, certainly, as the lines are animated by and bent around their respective images, but the resolution arrives when this movement ceases and the images come to a rest. But this rest is not actual resolution or acceptance, as we've seen in numerous examples, but an acknowledgement that the poem's energy need not propel the speaker further. Instead, there's a settling into attentiveness (or a signaling of this moment, at least).

For a collection whose beginning was as a kind of active, linguistic *zazen,* perhaps the repetition of this close shouldn't be all that surprising. To me, this pattern reads like a return for the speaker to a beginning state—a return to beginner's mind. That this might make each poem a kind of prolonged divergence from a meditative state is a little troubling, but it speaks to the interchange between the two energies that first animated this collection: the tension between observation and attempted meaning-making. Viewed this way, these poems begin from a foundation of Zen-informed, disciplined observation that is pulled on and carried away by the invigorated energy of the poem and the speaker's desire for connection, understanding, and meaning. It is these desires, the *ego,* that animate the speaker and propel the poem away from a point of rest. The tension arises in the currents *between* these energies—and it is here that the poem emerges, an artifact of this tension but also, hopefully, sustaining it.

This in-between space, to me, is the phenomenological "truth" these poems ultimately offer, the small aspect of the world they work to unconceal: for this speaker and his search for

his place on the North Dakotan Plains, he finds incompleteness, uncertainty, but also, hope. While the long, penultimate poem of the collection closes with yet another image of uncertainty, the final poem is a return to the collection's starting point—in traveling, and in seeing North Dakota once more through a window. What the speaker finds in this poem is a quiet but radical shift in perspective—a forced return to beginner's mind. Rather than darkness outside the small, regional plane window, he finds

not darkness

but more light: house lights and farm lights,
hundreds upon hundreds of them

dotting the valley bottom.
Through the jetwash of the engine, the prairie smolders.

The truth this speaker finds is the imperative to always return again, to see again. Despite all the unknown and unknowable, the imperative is to move into the phenomenal unthinkable and return again to the beginning. This returning provides, in its own way, a sustenance of spirit.

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CHAPTER TWO

POEMS

Mantra for Late-Night Driving

Tall order—guessing at the future.

Driving summer-dry roads
in the Montana night,
blacker than a dreamless sleep,

the void of space hanging lower
than I've ever seen it.

What I'm driving toward or what I'm driving away from—
caught between significances.

All I see is the present
glut of emptiness and whatever
beauty

with which it might be endowed.
Just the present—

this shortened exhalation, the humming
of the warm tires on the asphalt,

dim headlights brushing the roadside trees
like a fleeting, tired thought—
just this.

○ ○ ○

Letter from a Traveler

Through Dickinson now and I can see for miles ahead
and miles behind—*for all the good it does you,*
my wife says from the passenger seat.

Just more road and emptiness like a long head line stringing off into the unknown—

That's clarity of mind and considerateness, they say someplace, but not here.
No clarity here—at least not the kind I need.

The Plains roll out before me

like a projection screen and the opening credits have yet to crackle to life.
Is it blank slate or carte blanche?
To me, it feels like baptism,

an emptiness that burns in its starkness
and cleans in its burning.

Another mile marker goes about its business
and back beyond it, an abandoned barn,

summer sunlight blowing through its ice-stained frame,
and I wonder what it looked like years ago

and how it sees itself now—I wonder
what I'll fight to keep with me
and what I'll cast aside.

How it Evens Out

Grand Forks, ND

While summer swings mid-step
to the earth's tethering spin,

the sky looks tired—the stain weathered away
from its grain and clouding up now.

And I feel weathered, too, like I could be on my seventh life by now,
or eighth, to sympathize so easily with the ephemeral sky.
That's getting older, I suppose.

I watch the clouds break over the sun and think
it's funny how transience makes things glow—

The afternoon grass grows greener in the patchwork shade,
and from it, from nothing:

dragonflies emerge—they float,
themselves like stalks of iridescent grass

grown wings and I wonder what karmic equation
could balance such levity,

what cosmic work is done this far North,
and what is has to do with me.
What part in this ritual is mine?

No answer but the buzz of their flight
and cars on a distant road.

The cheesecloth clouds part again
and the dragonflies glow celadon green,

myrtle in the sun green, the green of a parakeet that's been plugged
straight into the wall—unreal in their bobbing glow…

the humid breeze, their weightless luminescence—
surely looks like redemption,
the beauty karma makes in the morning Midwestern heat.

And as the heat backs down, having tired itself out some,
the dragonflies seem to recede, too,

their buoyancy tempered by the afternoon grown long
though the sun won’t set for hours.
The days are long

this far North as the sun walks shallowly
across the sky.

The dragonflies have time still for their floating and darting
among the irised flowerbeds

and ought to take advantage of it.
I know I would.

Letter from the Homesick (or, Suggestion)

Grand Forks, ND

I could convince you the wind
hushing the trees

was ocean breaking against beach—
that same rush and trailing off,

my voice into your seashell ear
as you inhale and tell me yes—I can smell salt
and birds calling. But we're still

in the Midwest, the sea hundreds of miles away;
the buoy-shaped bell toll is just the train inching through town,

and the absolute sky is busy with its own suggestions:
the clouds chandeliers lit by sun, so bright,
like someone flipped a switch inside—but still
they run across the ground as shadow.

Does the cloud think of itself as light, or shadow?
Or am I projecting again?

I drive to the edge of town, and look over the ocean
of grass, broken only by the odd oak, a passing car,

to watch the sun sink down into the ruler-straight horizon.
I close my eyes, now, to hear the wind

without what sight might suggest, and when I ask
what truth grows out in those fields, what's made by this earth

and this sky, the wind just says *yes*
as it runs past me into the dark.

Instructions for North Dakota Prairie Walking

What looks shin-high is knee-high.
What looks knee-high is waist-high.

What you'd bet everything is just up to your waist
can swallow a grown man whole.

This is also true of snow, to a certain degree;
the banks running across the plains
makes guessing dangerous.

Little-known fact: prairie grass can be found in banks,
and unlike snow, can harbor snakes.

September Metaphysics

Grand Forks, ND

Late fall afternoon feels always like a question
I can't put my finger on:

something about the living and the dead,
a counting towards the unknown.

It feels mysterious—the space between things,
the way the light plays interstitial.

Here, the wind blows
light into the house; almost-dry leaves

blush with autumn and their branches twist
like a cotton dress hung out to dry.

Wind-chimes count off the seconds,
bright, haphazard clock.
When the breeze wanes,

silence comes in like the tide;
expectation plays between the notes, my ear strained to the window—

until the breeze rolls through again and the chimes ring:
song, sing sing
lazy soprano rising up, inquisitive,

like the child's voice outside playing,
counting *three, two, one*…and I feel the smallest urge to hide.

Amazing how ingrained a cadence can be—
the first hider is found with a shriek of delight

and everything seems to move forward again,
onward
toward the next unfound thing.

Puzzle

While the dishes hold one another up
in the soap-strewn sink, and the night

comes over the town like a mood,
my wife busies herself with a puzzle:

brightly printed, flower-full, its edges
cut with random precision.

This seems itself the point, this arranging of disparate parts,
the power of representation compressed—

She fingers through the tussled pile of cardboard,
piece by piece, looking

for that pink-edged middle, or lily on the water.
Outside, the streetlights and bare poplars arrange themselves against the black,

tall stalks humming stiffly in the bluster.
From the window, it looks a whole other world

out there, bending with wind and endarkenment.
In another, smaller world,

the sky is thumbed neatly into place,
its printed blue and bright clouds.

Portrait of the Poet with Wallace Stevens

The sun already gone and the first lamp lit
in the room that backgrounds us:

a good room for meeting and talking, undisturbed,
where I can imagine our sitting

side by side less a juxtaposition
than a pair of versions—difference in degree only,
                but degree of what, I don't know.

We don't speak, the artist going more for pensive
thought than engaged discussion—or am I assuming too much?

Regardless, the eye is drawn to the canvas edge
where a window's open to the dark out there,

and just pale wisps of a moon filtering in.
There's no time for selfishness

Beneath the moon's luster, you might say,
                having just noticed my selfishness
with time, my stealing away from the world

for only a moment to linger in-frame,
when everything outside smacks of some lesser truth

and in this inner world, threatening any moment
to unravel, I peek out the window
                to see that big face crane down,

expressionless but aglow. *You must become an ignorant man again,*
you'd say, *And see the* moon with an ignorant eye?

Don't we risk being consumed by it?
What could we possibly see clearly in the idea of it?

Here, we are captives of its luminescence,
seeing nothing of our own feeling, our own emotion. Only light

playing across the room, oiled in the muted colors
of twilight
                some togetherness etched out of darkness,

framed by something imaginary,
and made real for being just so.

○ ○ ○

Letter from Abandoned Barn to Unambiguous Sky

Sky, what do you know of helplessness?[1] My eaves ache with it. Not long since man had made a home of me—I'm left now to the field and line of poplars which have also begun to dry and fall like permanent shadows across the grass. My body leans and rots, transfigured into accidental altar: my rafters bird-feathered, floors mouse-clawed—my leaf-papered walls aspire to translucence. Even my voice groans wild, the croaking sigh I've learned from raven song—my eaves ache with it. What do you know of helplessness?

Letter from Unambiguous Sky to Abandoned Barn

That you pierce me so and ask of helplessness—
your paint-stripped skeleton

leaning into me more and more and the gall
to say such things:
Abandoned?

Do I not fill you? Do I not sing
through all the slats and joints of you?

You're less altar than pedestal, a heap
upon which I stand.

I am the only true altar there ever has been,
everything
held up to my splendor,

or cast away from my thundering.
You, most of all,
should know this.

But you're too much of man—to say *wild*
like there's a *civilized.*
There only is.

Letter from Abandoned Barn to Unambiguous Sky

Sky, what do you know? How can there only *be* when I can the hands of man erased from me? My floorboards cut by hand and foot, worn smooth by their and their dancing. But now I leak out into the world. Long ago emptied out, my beams burn in the sun; my seeps out into the endless wind (into you, into). I'm not ready to fall away, not ready to return to field and earth. *Sky, what do you know?*

Letter from Unambiguous Sky to Abandoned Barn

This cannot be prepared for.
To the field, to the soil, to me—your time was always short.

Even the fine nail will rust,
the straight beam rot.

To cling to your usefulness brings only anguish,
more creaking gone unheard.

It is not a leaking out that you are feeling, but a *returning*
Do you not feel that?

The *readiness* was never your choice.
What's left to you is peace.

Ease down into the earth again—not for them—but for you.
What do I know? I know the groan of your sinking.

I know that time, for those who feel it,
is always too short.

Letter from Abandoned Barn to Unambiguous Sky

Sky, what do you? I was braced against the
, against snow and squall yet I nothing
out now. Even my tightest beams have split like
in the snow. hold me? That
I might stand a while longer? grows
harsh my bones splintered—even those
softened in winter sun. Too short, yes,
too short. me. *Sky, do you?*

Letter from Unambiguous Sky to Abandoned Barn

Speak no more. I know you grow weary.

You will not crumble this night; you will not yet
be blown away.
My snow will be light upon your roof.

Tonight, as my breath grows heavy
and dark,
my moon will glow brightly.

I will hold you up still longer—my arms
beneath your grain-split eaves.

I will bathe you in starlight.

○ ○ ○

October in Fragments

Autumn in the Red River Valley
arrives with its own kind of humility—

Draped in his mist-clothes, the morning sun
looks a neon moon: bone-white paper lantern

glowing behind clouds winded by some northern grassland
whose tinge we can't help but taste,
an exhalation

from the pressure can of summer.
You can almost hear the *whoosh*

as all that air rushes out
and our shoulders collectively untense.

○

In the park beside the high school,
the maples are already glowing

a rusty orange, burning something deep within themselves
to keep warm, or to egg on what's coming.

There's something admirable
in taking the initiative.

Beneath their boughs, in the still-green grass
plumped and dark from September rain,

the maples lay out bright skirts of leaves,
a stark, technicolor contrast

that feels unnatural: around each tree
a burning halo edged lightly into the grass.

At a distance, they look like rusted eyes,
apertures through which we might glimpse

something of ourselves,
                    something eternal—
but perhaps that's too grandiose.

It makes you think, though: what swatch of color
is made by the present settling into the past?

○

A few days ago, my old dog Sam had enough
of the world,
or became too much for it.

Brain cancer was all the vet could say for sure—life welling
up inside him like the grass strewn with leaves:

a billowing when the wind comes through,
turning them over like pages, pushing

everything inexorably forward.
More leaves, more leaves.

This afternoon, the world is foaming over with tiny deaths,
too many to imagine properly, like water

moving too fast for frost to catch.
But autumn is not the dying season,

it turns out, not the season of decay.
No—it is the birth and bright unfurling

of nothingness, when it's easier to be human,
easier to be *something* against so stark a background.

○

When I walk close enough to the trees
to feel small, to peer down into the apertures

their leaves make in the grass, nothing looks back.
Nothing stares back at me. That’s something
of a kindness, isn’t it?

Rabbit Hunting near Manvel, ND

Freezing daybreak—the world is all mist
and the pastels morning sun makes of the sky.
Rabbits have pulled me out of bed,

the chance to put meat on the table,
or what little this just-plowed soybean field might hold.

This morning the fog veils everything—the sun curls over the horizon
and icy mist illuminates:
a bright, sparkling world.

But soon, unhurried, the fog begins to burn

and the cottonwood I've hunkered down against becomes two,
and then three, and then an entire row,
growing out into the field tree by tree.

Where I thought I was alone, I am not.
The empty barn steps timidly out

of the mist from its far corner of the field,
sunken and moss-stained.

Its twin windows, shutters long rotted away,
become eyes looking out on the brittle earth,

and on me, looking back. And I realize how the rabbits
must feel, this being watched and the silence
that comes from it—the silence the wind
can't rustle away.

Cloud Study

I sit down and try again
to write out the terrain of the sky,

like it's the poet's job to document
what everyone else walks past:

the treeshade singing in the grass, the key
of birdsong, the symptoms of pent-up apathy.

But the sky is what gets me. I open the blinds
and line things up,
try get everything verbatim—

classic afternoon watercolor, soft streaks of blue and gray,
something Romantic, or perhaps a darker mood,

acrylic stratus the result of some god
cleaning her brushes,

plumes of color leaching into the sky.
(Painting is ripe for sky metaphor.

It's in the making of something
the two share spirit.)

But there's an oppressive quality there, too:
in the glow of a cloud, something we're standing up to,

writing against in our small way.
And in that, what is this poem?

What wound can I inflict, or rock can I throw?
My pen is drying out,

but the wind keeps pushing worlds
across the prairie, some dark, some golden,
some spun by storm-light,

and I keep tracing their figures—making still
what we can't reach up and touch,
what we can't slow down.

All in a Stupor

Night seeping into the room—doesn't it always?

Afternoon coffee cup empty,
at its bottom dried ghost of a moon.

Loose pages hanging over the worn-edged desk,
the mood of intrepid droop.

The northerly wind's all in a stupor, tired of even itself.
It's all there outside my window—the pushing through, the continuous return,

and me, seeing the pliant in the immovable,
the smoke in the lucid:
what a thing to occupy oneself with.

Letter from the Snowfields

It came from out across the fields
before the sun, the fog like whipping cream into water—

a coyote calling out *who*
in its rising melancholy yowl.

My eyes pulled to the field from where it came—
crop rows worked into lines
bending ‘round the old growth trees,

the fingerprint of some primeval giant.
And then another *yip-howl* out from the frosted grass,
an illegible answer—

I stood between them, mute in my humanness,
standing stock-still, the hair on my neck the only reply

to this ancient language, this tooth and claw answer and call.

See No Loneliness

Cities need to be alone and oceans
and the moon gets too much credit
lets leave it out of this.
— Bob Hicok

Leaving out leaving out is how I live in a city this small town has gotten too intimate. Though thankfully tonight the moon has checked out just deadpan clouds glinting bright with fresh snow glow I feel hemmed in. We've been just ushered in by winter & an impotent thermometer (just can't get it up) so we keep our own company indoors our existential dread amplified through computer whose hands over ears hear no loneliness speak no. I've become practiced at that particular game can't help admiring my friend's dog (named Steve of all things) walks in boldfaced to sit with me & have my hand rest for a moment even on his hind flank.

Notes on a Fresh Snow

The snowed-over yard begs to be impressed upon,
but my neighbor busies himself with the sidewalk

and his shovel, its concrete scrape
the same timbre as the scratch of a pen,

both distant and tuned to a pointlessness
that might be admirable, depending

on your point of view. From the window,
it occurs to me these hedges of snow

should be named—the sculpted banks
cut by white breath and shovel. Even if only

admired absently each after-snow morning
by the neighbor in her nightgown

come to let her dog out. Even Charles
the dog regards the snow mounds,

for what purpose I can only guess.
I'll have to jot down some noun

that might do it justice but not sit too heavily,
lest it fall through.

Midwinter

after Louise Glück

Even now this landscape is assembling.
Prairie winter-singed. The cattle
are restless in the barn,
the snow having fallen
and drifted innumerable miles,
wind-shorn, crystalline,
as the toothless sun shows low noon.

This is a barrenness
of light. No figure stands in the snow.
Just a raven pair,
tree-perched,
calling *Longer now. Longer now.*
And their chant is swept away on the wind

toward an already gathering brume.

Enough

I'm tuned to the color of early winter morning;
enough with all the thinking—

I open the blinds of my east-facing window
for a smaller because,

a lower-case invocation of what
need be nothing but what it is.

That sounds more complicated than it is;
but isn't that always the way

the emerald arborvitae shadows lick over the snow?
The way the neighbor's chimney-smoke flies northward
like an unknowable omen?

Enough of reading the signs, marking the movements.
Enough thinking meaning is something to be found

if one just keeps looking—eastern twilight deep blue and then gray
and then white as its head lifts over the grasslands.

The blackbird across the way falls silent—
enough singing, too.

Just the sun over everything
like hopefulness?

A mild antidepressant borne in light,
the snowdrifts' glimmer like yesterday's important things

now just more light. Enough with the dark things, for now.

Winter Lines

Winter is gifted at showing us the lines
that were there all along:

the leaves of the black ash and green ash buried in snow
reveal the woody veins in all their twists and undulations,

each bough motionless
chiaroscuro in black and white.

And all along the creek run more bare woods
and just outside them a rabbit's cursive tracks in the white—

in and out and into the thin timber in a language
I'm still learning to read, a dialect that's all impression.

Watching and not asking is what it asks us to do: *zazen* wrapped up
in a down jacket and hat, hands tucked deep into our pockets, feet still.

Letter from the Snowfield

We found it piece-meal & ice-painted,
its legs wrenched away, missing—

A doe skeleton hung against the trunk of a pine,
ribs edged in gristle, frozen blood,

the snow-crusted skull,
eyes fixed on some distant unseen thing.

We wondered who had pinned her here,
who labored to make this altar, this shrine—
and to which gods?

We lingered for some time, waiting,
I think, for some reason to walk out of the woods,

but nothing came but the pine shadows
reaching out along the ground
as the dusk came down.

I flinched as he tapped my shoulder,
awoken from some enchantment.

Let's pull her down, he said, tugging his gloves
out of his pocket.
No—let's leave her be, I said.

We'll come back a different route,
back around the long way.

Coyote Tracks

I hope that years from now,
I will remember the lightness

of these coyote tracks in the snow,
pressed almost imperceptibly
into the snow drift—

about how ephemeral the wild can be,
how pounds of fur and claw

can be only millimeters of displaced snow,
seen only because the sun's just crept

over the horizon and poured shadow
into that ice-crusted paw.

A Wintered Mind

In the ice-scabbed towns of North Dakota,
the snow makes bare everything,

the only song the vast hollow flight
of wind over cold country.
Light-speckled air—even that freezing.

The dappled paper of the ground & printless, stoic sky.

Charles Wright said lament is strong
in the bare places—but what is here to grieve?

The speckled alder grieves for nothing
and nods contentedly in the breeze, unbothered.
No, he must mean the bare places

make space for lament—
that it grows well without competition,

among ice and silence and snow.
His must be a mind not yet wintered,

not yet able to listen in the snow
and hear the sound of the land

in that same bare place
until he becomes nothing himself.
Me, I'm not quite there yet.

I still hear too much of my own boots
crunching in the snow and my own mind on the wind.

That too will be carried off,
soon enough.

A Treatise on Christmas Decoration

Inside awaiting hard snow
and the windless silence

that comes down
before it. It'll be a cold Christmas this year,
they're saying.

No matter: we're not long
for the Plains and their storms

that descend like the backslash held down.
We're soon to move East and so the temporary

hum of the holidays
is turned down a few notches.

Our decorations are sparse,
the box labeled *X-MAS* left up in the closet.

Not even a tree this year,
nothing to twist in lights

or needle the house
like an accidental casting of lots.

And not because we'll
soon be gone.
Not because

it's such an expense—
but because my wife can't bear

to see it lumped over,
thin and brown
on the side of the road

when its three weeks
have come and gone.

And I love her
for that.

A Nightjar Study

The nightjars are whirring again—
gathering the dark into themselves

like flighted reservoirs. Or at least I like to think
namesakes are that simple.

Or that our nomenclature endows
the named with those powers.

These used to be *nihthræfn* in Old English:
night raven. That's a literary pedigree,

if ever I've heard one.
But they're no raven at all,

despite their silhouettes of night against the twilight blue.
No, *nightjar* is something we need more, I think.

We need something—like us—that can gather the darkness,
but that can also let it go again—
when the day's almost done.

That's the part we haven't mastered yet:
the casting off again.

We've something to learn from the swoop
of their long wing and their vibrating call,

their dutiful chattering
into the dark.

The First Drops of Rain

The doves mourning as they will,
bough-hidden, nested, and the brewer's blackbirds

trilling away
makes me feel mute.

So many tongues whose shape I'll never know,
intonations for which I'll never have an ear.

But even my most somber realizations
are stilled by the sound

of my wife
roused in the next room,

her soles padding down the hall
like the first drops of rain,

then the smallest
creak of the bathroom door swing.

This is a language I know,
the quiet whir of the domestic,

the idioms of intimacy,
a low whisper in my ear.

I put down my pen, close by book,
humming to warm my voice.

Lilac

When I draw open the blinds,
the shadows all leap away.
They've got things to do, places to haunt
in a non-threatening way.
But there's less work these days:
spring, surprisingly bright,
has been making a big show
like someone turned it up all the way.
I like how impersonal that is—
the someone conjured up from nothing
like the endless lilacs
at this precise moment in North Dakota:
blushing clusters
plumped by the freeze,
their tiny extravagance
brought over from the old world—
purposeless—save for their pulling our noses
when the breeze tussles
them just right.
We like to think we can
sniff out the figurative from the literal,
the imagined from the real
but the twilight's making fools of us all
tonight, the neighborhood aglow
in metaphor and lilac bloom.
I don't mind. There's no need for discernment
when the May evening's this warm
and one can sit outside.
The lilac stalks nod agreeably
from the neighbor's yard—
a beauty we deserve less than we realize.

The Crowning of Trees

We drove west, Ashley and I, across four states,
geographical and metaphysical both,

the power of boundaries surprisingly
resonant when we photograph the signs.

I don't remember every *Welcome to*
or gas stop off the highway,
                but I do recall

the twilit hour in northern Colorado—
the almost-day slipping past the no-longer-night

with an uncertain ontology
to which we'd arrived late.

She pointed out the color of the tree tops
as the first leaves were steeped in sun,

how it looked like a crown of light
on the tallest first, and then every tree

in turn: an arboreal crowning
in the only kingdom that matters.

We'd both been tree-starved,
the utility pole being the joke answer to
                "what is the North Dakota state tree?"

But even more than the trees, I recall most
two horses who had all the field

to run in, the morning light
flushing dewed grass for acres and acres,

the kind of place horses always are
when one dreams of horses.

But the two horses, all they did
was nuzzle each-other
                across the fence—

one long head curved intimately
around the other—like in all this sun-drenched

landscape the only thing worth remembering
was each-other.

○ ○ ○

The Telephone Game (or, Transmutation in Neural Color)

Los Angeles, CA

It may not be written in any book, but it is written—
You can't go back,
you can't repeat the unrepeatable.

—Charles Wright, *Littlefoot*

We'll never see the ocean.
It looks impenetrable, she said,
this wall of fog leaning against Santa Monica
like a late-morning dream—

But we came for just this: to look off
past our continent for a while. So, we walk

hand-in-hand down the pier,
that disappointing bridge,
past schoolchildren and hot dog carts,

into the coy Pacific, the air salt-licked,
the easy sigh of far-off waves,

to the furthest point—
and it emerges finally from the fog

like something almost remembered,
the foam-stitched gray
nudged up from some great depth,
the surface lilting like the voices all around us.

The breeze ambles in, a gentle insistence,
but then it slacks off,
even that fleeting.

Everything slows, the wavecrests hanging for just
a moment too long before being dipped back down again,

and I wonder if I've wandered
into this mental space alone,

this melancholy amongst the laughter

and Ferris Wheel music,
its tone hollowed out.

My wife—her head turned back to the street,
where PCH bleeds into Ocean
and becomes one thick vein—sighs in her own language.

Let's go back, she says,
wrapping her scarf a little tighter.
It's getting chilly out here.

○

North from Los Angles to high desert,
the heads of San Gabriel hooded in snow,

everything cut in mountain light,
luminous—

pass after pass, the 14 North reads like a river
whose path has changed course,

the cement having grown older into the earth.

Bigcone spruce, frost-tipped up high,
stand along the ridge,

their long shadows streaks of paint carelessly drawn down the mountainside:

everything transformed and everything the same,
surprising to find my memory living a whole other life
apart from me,

the surprise of returning
to a place that never was.

It seems the great cliché: you can't go back—
But it never fails to wound.

Here we are, *back*,
yet no place I recognize.

○

What is that bird trilling spring out there—
its voice shined up like a penny?

It chatters in the language of nostalgia,
fogged over and frail,
saying and saying the same words,
but rearranged as something new—what?

Again it sings the same song, and again,
echoing a meter I've heard before, I think.

Youth? The familiar? That which cannot
be pulled up by the root?

It's all variation on the same song, all remakes,
but still we work to hold onto something:

our memories like clothes we put away in the closet
until their seams dissolve—moth-eaten into self-delusion.

Driving through these almost-familiar streets,
I'm trying on all my delusions today,
one after another,

until I'm dressed wholly in memory,
warm, sun-blurred, resonant.

○

What feels like time travel, like pulling a book off the shelf,
isn't like that at all: *your memory is like the telephone game*,

each moment whispering in its own voice.

Your memory of an event can grow
less precise
even to the point of being
totally false
with each retrieval

I think we've always known the past is something re-remembered,
prone to the fissure and sleight of the mind—

just strange to see it put down into words, mapped in neurons and synapses

twinkling in LCD like the faint light of a seaside town
seen from way offshore.

And still so unsatisfying—the description of the thing
not being the thing at all.

It's all part of my own slippery business, I guess:

putting one word after another after another out across the page
like the wake of something unseen just up ahead—

○

I don’t know what I expected to find,
coming back home.

I wanted to put my hands to something
I know, or that knows me

after making home somewhere else—
the Plains and its too-big sky.

But it is those pasts we draw out often, what we put our hands to,

that are irreparably changed in our handling them,
their lines painted over by the present flush of the senses.

Like a game of telephone? Are our pasts no more
than some neurological game—the string pulled taut

along the years of our lives, each pulling,
almost imperceptibly,

on the next? What of myself have I erased by remembering?
What of others—

○

Driving Soledad canyon,

I’m trying to draw it all out—the lines between things
as they have been and things as they are,

like a distant highway or shelter-belts far across a cleared field.

Things as they are have been destroyed.
Have I? He asks in the back of my mind.

The lines are blurring, refusing to keep straight,
like drapes against an open window,
the fabric folding in and over itself

against some unseen force. That old song
comes on the radio: *and I don't know*
What I'm doing in this city

The sun is always in my eyes
It crashes through the windows—

○

What strange transmutation does the present lay over the past?
A folding over of the edges, a filtering, a new map scrawled
invisibly over the old?

It makes the scope of everything grand—these pines
whisking past taller and greener.

It makes me think about the foreignness of being
alive, always a new shadow

cast by the same tree,
never setting foot in the same anything twice—
you know the saying.

And what that makes of us—a permanent impermanence.
Then, where do we get our sense of the eternal? The glimmer

of gods in the deepwood sunshine, their whisper back beyond
the firelight—everything immovable to our transience.

Transcend and *descend* share the same root:
scandere, meaning *to climb.*

○

A hand emerges from the periphery—
coming to rest briefly on my arm.

You've missed the exit, she says
her voice smiling. *You're distracted.*

No matter; we take the back way
home—through Bouquet and past Elizabeth Lake,

stopping off on Godde Hill
to look out over the town. From this distance,

it's a grid whose lines have grown tighter, denser,
less knowable since I stood here last—but still the few

that shoot off into the desert, beyond where the eye can see.
The air's cool enough that smoke snakes

up from chimneys as the moon ascends.
The cursive lines wind up, each a sentence indecipherable

but still going up, going up.

○ ○ ○

Whisper

We fly back in the North Dakotan dark
of a cloudless night

and the waxing curve of a moon.
Back to Grand Forks and the abundance

of late spring. For a short time,
our world shrinks,

down to the scale of tray table, paperback,
and bad coffee. Point of view

grows dull in the pressurized
cabin and its drab sense of courtesy.

The real show is out there:
the towns below glow like islands of light

amidst the endless fields—
and as I look closer,
what surrounds those burning clusters of city is not darkness

but more light: house lights and farm lights,
hundreds upon hundreds of them

dotting the valley bottom.
Through the jetwash of the engine, the prairie smolders.
And I thought

I'd come to know this place—that I'd mapped
its lines and the space between them,

the emptiness from Manvel to Merrifield.
I tap my wife on the shoulder

that she might lean over and look out on the glittering
valley together. *I thought it'd just be dark down there,*
she whispers

in the nighttime voice of travelers.
I did, too, I say. I did, too.

NOTES

"Sky, what do you know…" is a line borrowed from Jaclyn Hymes

"your memory is like the telephone game," & *Your memory of an event can grow less precise even to the point of being totally false with each retrieval*" are passages from Marla Paul's "Your Memory is like the Telephone Game" (*Northwestern Now*, Sept. 2012), which describes a study that confirms our memory is far less reliable than we realized—that old memories, especially those often recalled, are more likely to be associated and altered by present experience or more recent memories.