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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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Apprenticeship

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in English

by

Michael Gordon Gould

Thesis Committee:
Professor Michael Ryan, Chair
Professor Amy Gerstler
Professor Julia Lupton

2018

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Abstract of the Thesis:

Apprenticeship

By

Michael Gould

Master of Fine Arts in English

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Professor Michael Ryan Chair

This manuscript is a collection of poems written during the past three years. Every poem has undergone extensive revision and will serve as the foundation for a full-length book of poems.

Self Portrait as North Dakota Oilfield Drill Bit

I bore myself into the unknown
with the hope of hitting oil,
ignoring the wounds I inflict upon the world
and those it, in turn, inflicts on me.

I pretend that if I work for long enough
and hurl enough dirt into the air,
success will slip back into my life
like an old lover in a snowy park
at the end of a sad movie.

But when the shift-whistle shrieks
and I am lifted from the earth,
I discover that *success* is already married to the foreman
as he turns his back to the wind and lights a smoke,
looking vaguely like a young Paul Newman.

And so I depart, possessing nothing
with which I did not begin
as I am lifted into the back of a Mack-truck
and hauled to a foundry outside Bellfield

where the churning autumn light spills, wine-like,
across the painfully golden,
and immaculate,
and dying,
spatter of badland grass.

I.

Chess Poem

When I was six years old
my father taught me how to play.

He drew a board in crayon
on the back of a paper bag,

used his forearm to keep the lines even.

He worked in a grocery store in the evenings.
Sometimes on the weekends too.

He called me his prodigy.

It was at a fold-out kitchen table,
bishops & knights
quiet in their shoebox tomb,

where I was to learn a lesson from the game.

I had slaughtered my father's king

(he always let me win)

& was pushing back from the table
when he caught me by the wrist, asked

what I thought would become of the king's soul.

"Oblivion...?" "Damnation...?"

I could give him no answer.

But that night I would go to bed
(I never did tell him this)

afraid to wake

into a sludge of dreamless slumber
(midnight, tar-pit slumber)

or lake of wind-bent flame.

But even “Eternal Bliss”

can be terrifying. Those children’s book
Bible illustrations: lions & lambs

in the shade of an olive tree, stoned,

drooling. Cartoon eyes alive
in the glow of my bedside lamp.

I was afraid. I was afraid of it all.

In the years to come, I would
think back to that house:

the plastic clack of a rook
taking an enemy queen,

while in the den the jazz of Monk,
angular, dissonant, crackles

from a secondhand boom-box
into the empty corners of the room.

And I would remember a story

my father used to tell me

of how Monk had once created
the most beautiful two seconds of music

my father had ever heard, by accident,

when his fingers, wet on the tips
of polished keys, trembled

& slipped. I can still see him—my father,

bent over that kitchen table, tobacco ash
like snowfall
on our old paper board.

I watch him set up the pieces.

I watch him consider
his opening move.

Then a flick of the wrist,
as from the den
a wonderfully odd lick by Thelonious unfurls,

and he sends his first pawn
to death's little door,

believing, as I do,
he has made the right sacrifice.

River Elegy

for Tony

Early November. Fog like a tarp
over gray water. And how strange to see them: grackles
quiet in the sugar maples your father
stood beneath for a photograph
in the final week of his life.
Slicked back hair.
Hounds-tooth jacket.
Again, it comes unbidden—

St. Kate's Episcopal. January.
Rafters and stained glass in candlelight,
and your Uncle Logan's eulogy
crackles from the pulpit
like sleet over jasmine leaves,
while you, my friend,
unwitting ambassador of sidelong glances,
sit stunned in the pew below.

Ode to The Loon and its Cry

—two notes,

expanding shrill and clean,
becoming in decay, the space

they span: moonlight
in black branches, oak roots thumbing

Coke cans half-buried
in autumn sleet. On water,

the loon's eyes jewel the shiver
of shallow minnows, web vectors

of where fish, not are, but *will be*.
When the beak strikes, swift

as a switchblade's flick,
momentum lifts

the bird to flight, wingtips
turned to bass clefs as

the song unfolds again—
calore, adagio;

the glissando of a cellist
playing alone in an empty hall,

bending an A string
to the shape her mind creates,

stitching each note to
the sound of falling snow.

Driving to St. Luke's Hospital in Duluth, Minnesota

From the top of the hill you can see the entire city. The blue-gray harbor of Lake Superior wrapped in a curtain of billowing fog. Wind-soaked sunlight leaking through the cloud deck the weatherman says is broken as I think of my little brother in his starched white robe, spooning clumps of *Cheerios* into the body that will soon house an eighteen-and-one-half-ounce lobe of my lower-left lung. I light a Newport and shift into neutral, coasting past the oil spatter of motels and twenty-four-hour convenience stores, the drift of chimney smoke rising from rooftops and diffusing into the air like a fraudulent alibi only very cheaply engineered. Three hours to the operation. Minutes dissolve like strands of burning hair. The surgeon will make a seven-inch incision between my fourth and fifth ribs, will pry me open like a stubborn lily refusing in the springtime to bloom. Steam advances up the windshield of my Chevy, blurring the string of painted yellow lines into needles of Novocain thrusting their sharpened metal tongues into the clenched and trembling stomach muscles I will—God, hold me to this—no longer employ as a vehicle for my fledging sense of self-infatuation. I am nothing to desire. No prize to be won. From the exit ramp, I make a left on Michigan Street—the same road we would take on family trips to the north shore: Mom up front with Luther Vandross on cassette, my brother counting mile markers and Volkswagens from the backseat. But the fog this morning. The Lake. Blue Minnesota daybreak held in condensation's cool embrace, suspended over the waves as if by my own sheer need to believe the tangible can sometimes bend the laws of reality. And as I pull into the parking lot of the hospital, a pocket of humidity pressed to the seam of the sky feels about to rupture, but for the stitching that holds it all together, the tension in the air, the pulse, the steady respiration of the freshwater surf.

Ode to the Canoe

Because its wake marks the space between
where it's been and where it has just arrived.
Troubled water under stern. The tangent of a circle
it will, if paddled on only one side,
create. But this is supposed to be about the canoe, which,
lacking ambition, seems content with buoyancy.
Put a person in a canoe and things get complicated.
Vessel within a vessel. Captain without a crew. Destination
becomes an issue. Give a man a paddle or teach him how to row?
The mind is a paddle, thought: a key-less map. A hand is not a paddle
until its fingers taste the waves, which, look closely,
blur the moon to a thousand mouths of dusk.
To want something badly enough, they whisper at the touch.

Apprenticeship

My father dips his paintbrush into
a mason jar of Pratt & Lambert,

turns it vertical to avoid a spill,
and, cupping a palm beneath

its tapered tip, slips the handle
into my fingers and closes them

around it. Time to work,
his silence tells me, his nod so subtle

I can't be certain it was there.
We're painting the living room

the Saturday before Christmas
and my father doesn't need to

tell me what I already know:
Make your first brushstroke

a modest gesture. Tuck it
in a corner behind a door,

an alcove swept in shadow.
This first touch, I have learned,

however gently applied,
feathered and blended to

the face of the surrounding wall,
will always bear a trace

of the hand that made it,
an echo of its inception,

a footprint still visible
after filling in with snow.

Morning Workout

Knees bent, back straight as the spine of an axe,
I hurl my burden upward, and my arms with it, my body

pulling a part of me away from me. Five minutes in,
the instructor—younger brother of a friend from Richfield High—

urges the class with two claps: *Form outweighs sheer mass*. Of course,
I don't believe him, and, catching my reflection flush

in wall-length glass, heave the weight again, bite my lip
to stifle a cry. The friend, I can tell you now, hanged himself

in his aunt's garage. Only three weeks nineteen.
October frost on park benches, bus shelters,

the stone spires at St. Vincent's lit blue in floodlights
and fog. Jonathan. To have known your kindness,

which I did not deserve, your mother's grief, which I
can never understand, but must burn frantic as a match

in an attic, yet private as a wine stain in the opening chapter
of John. Jonathan. Could you have known, then or now,

how beautifully your sister sang *Carmen* in that dim cathedral,
each note a thread of smoke unfurling to air?

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] my burden [REDACTED] my body [REDACTED]
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[REDACTED] unfurling to air [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

On the Playgrounds of St. Francis Elementary

First-graders hurdle moon-blue rhinos
to chase dragonflies that smell of pine needles

& wind. All the swings have holes in the seats.
I call it *improved aerodynamics* & take advantage.

Skecher soles flush with sky, I split the air as I
imagine God's truth does, while below me,

my year-old daughter mumbles good morning
to the earthworm wound between her toes. Only,

it's more than a greeting, this song,
this river of liquids & glides—

better to call it a babbled hymn,
an offering to the world of sunlight

& mud, a whisper born from breath
where language does not yet live.

* * *

I'm in the memory ward
of the downtown VA, laying

my bouquet on the nightstand
and sitting beside my mother

on the edge of the unmade bed.
Filtered light. Drawn blinds. Her breath

a thread of warmth unfurling
as she furrows her brow

at her granddaughter
squirring silent in my arms.

This evening, we talk about what

my mother's language allows us—

only her most practiced concerns:
my father, fried catfish & jazz.

The house I grew up in.

Tuscaloosa. Corner lot. The way
summer rain battered the lawn

like quarter notes
spilled from Coltrane's golden bell

as our dog Brantley ran circles in the tulips,
leaping in the air to bite at the wet music.

Even if it didn't happen like this I'll say
it did. Later, after my mother has fallen

asleep, I think back to a story
she told me as a child.

(We were walking a creek's edge in fog
the morning after her youngest niece's wake):

In an instance of perceived weightlessness, she began,

skipping a stone that would vanish
before it hit the water a second time,

*the mind renders the body a myth
it no longer requires. This happens*

*on a swing set, the moment
you stop your ascent,*

but before you begin to fall.

II.

Found Journal Fragments

I. ELECTION NIGHT

The Minotaur,
drunk at the sight of

its own naked body,
regards the labyrinth

burning, brick-by-brick,
to the ground around it

with unconcern—

The way a ruler,
swimming a river of

yet-untamed,
grease-fire, self-desire,

is blind to the plight
of the peasants lining

his pockets, the shore.

This truth,

certain as night frost
on a White House lawn,

proves all tongues

complicit

in their refusal to acknowledge.

II. ELECTION NIGHT

This is as far from normal as we have been in a very long time.

III. UNTITLED

Co-conspirators, we plot against

the flesh that holds us,

forgetting,

time and again,

that each party pursues,

if not noble,

at least common goals.

V. ISOLATION

To believe nothing is wrong
makes it more likely
that nothing *is* wrong. This is an argument
about effect. Cut lilies on a bedside table.
The shadow of someone's voice
against the wall.

VI. ISOLATION

Powerless as a phone line
snagged on a spruce limb

the mind clutches at what
it knows it cannot keep.

VII. UNTITLED

Sex was a pill
of dirty light

that stained
our lips as we swallowed,

so we colluded
to make it holy,

depriving it the flesh—
we knew—

it could not
help but crave.

For weeks,
we searched

our sacred text
for loopholes.

When none
could be found,

it was as though a door
had shut behind us

and the room

in which we lay
devoured us, asleep

and awake, alive.

VIII. UNTITLED

In a windowless cell,
my terrible master

huddles in the corner,
sobbing into its palms.

It begs for toast and coffee.
I say no—pop another

bottle of Malbec. I don't
deem this *just*, exactly,

but I know I am
not to be trusted.

IX. UNTITLED

My grandmother died
in her sleep on a Friday.

Beside her, a hibiscus
sat on the windowsill

in the morning light.
Those final days, they tell me,

she would not swallow
her food. I understand

this as well as I understand
snowfall, which is to say

with a gentle intensity
that consumes everything

until there is nothing left
to recognize of my life at all.

Invisible Machine

In the country
to whom in homeroom
at age seven
I pledged allegiance
unaware of
the machinery humming
vast & silent outside
Cogs & gears churning
in autumn dawn
Hoisted rafters towering
formless against
the opal-vaulted sky
supporting nothing
casting no shade
In the country
of school-to-prison pipelines
private corporations
grown plump on the blood
of the young I ask
Is it better to be
a victim *to* greed
or *of* it? Perhaps
this is the wrong question
as now I witness
a new brand of justice bloom
inadequate invidious as if
its outcome reflects
free choices
by free people
abandoned in prison
mess-halls holding cells
scribbling scripture
on shinbones
shoulder-blades
Sometimes the decisions we make
have enormous negative consequences
So let us tip the scales
of change Let pain make a home
under breastbones
& rouse the dozing spirit

from the flesh
in which it lay
What did Descartes say
about ontology?
The ability to fathom
a perfect being is...
I realize how little this tells us
about our hands
The shape they make closing
around a throat
And here is where I know
I can't write this poem
from the swamp
of "me" and "now"
trapped in subjective misperception
Yet still I will suggest
that if this crisis inflicted
Santa Monica, Amherst, Irvine,
the system would
reform itself
from business as usual
acceptable when no one
with a pension is harmed.

III.

The Valet

I watched him through the lobby window
as I waited for housekeeping to prepare my room.
He was about sixty, flush-faced and thin. He had
parked my car and was jogging back to the hotel doors
in the falling snow. The alacrity with which he moved was
striking—nimble, fluid, he possessed an air of professionalism
that seemed to stem from, yet contrast with, a generosity
inherent to his character. Of course, I did not know this man. Yet
when I arrived to check-in, he had greeted me with such attention,
such patient care, that I knew he was a decent person. The snow
thickened out the window as I watched him lift a suitcase
for a young couple with a child. Something about this image
stuck with me. His face bore a ragged sadness,
a source of pain obscured even in its certain existence.
This man has suffered a great deal, I thought.
Something unspeakable has taken him in its fangs
and has not, over the years, let go.
Then, and with absolute clarity,
I felt as if I did know this man,
and I loved him at once
with a vigor I did not know I possessed
as I sat in the empty hotel lobby
and waited for housekeeping
to prepare my room.

In the Garden of St. Jude's

I can see him from the rectory window.
Lying on his back on the lawn,
a *National Enquirer* splayed across his chest,
he sleeps. One arm rises to cover his face, which,
in the morning light, glows
the color of my advent robe. One might consider him
the subject of a painting an artist has given up on
halfway through, a likeness
waiting to be made complete.

Yet
this man is not hung on the wall of the Louvre
or the Met, not guarded by a set of velvet ropes
(as a bored attendant opens her mouth to yawn).
He is here, beneath the cottonwoods,
in the shade of the church's stone façade.
He shifts in the heat,
pulls his Knicks cap to his eyes.
He knows too well he exists. The world
cannot convince him otherwise.

insomnia

a drop of food coloring
diffusing
in a pool of oil
 wispy strands
unfurling
like the birth of a galaxy

my shadow's shadow

tossing a handful of sunlight

into a chute of falling snow

a ladder pushed back from a wall

“if time is the boring snake
at the zoo
that no one stops to look at...”

I'm the rusty iron *Q*
in the liquor-store sign on Seventh

missing a bolt through my neck
 swinging
in a blue November breeze

below me: an incredibly tall
homeless man
selling roses from the parking lot

bending over to light
a Lucky Strike into
cupped gloveless hands.

Unfinished Still Life

Each object's border blurs
to what surrounds it. Lamp-light

on a saucer's lip. Three skulls
in quarter-profile. The attention to detail

verges on obscenity. The curve of a bowstring
trembles in the archer's hand. Of course,

it's all illusion: The light. The situation.
Yet the canvas strains to hold it—

flat, blunt, implying a dimension
it can't accommodate.

A Glimpse at the Wrong Side of the Canvas

He need not have written about any of it.
Doing so would offer no solace,
he knew, but in those moments at the Ridgedale Mall,
the teenage burger-bar cashier asking him
grape soda or orange,
the sensation had become so pronounced
he was certain he had stolen a glimpse
at the wrong side of the canvas.

It was the colors which had first gone wrong:
neon squiggles ebbing across the marble floor;
silver-scaled angelfish pressing their puckered lips to
the tops of his feet as they did not tremble or jump,
though he tried to make them.

Then went the sound:
a heat-scuffed southern drawl
warbling through the air as if
a honeybee
drunk on corn syrup
riding the swell of Bach or Brahms
spittling from speakers
nestled high between palm fronds.

He could not describe any of it.
The whole expanse of shapes and meaning had had enough
and ripped apart at the seam. All he wanted
was to text his wife, his kids,
maybe buy some balcony tickets
to a matinee of *Lear* at the Guthrie.
But there he stood at the burger-bar
in gray, pleated khakis as it all, thank God,
began to thin, the cashier staring at him,
extending in her hands two bottles of soda,
one orange, one grape,
and going on and on about it,
like water spilled free from its dam,
speaking of nothing, repeatedly—
nothing, that is, that he did not now completely understand.

Questioning the Self

How did we come to believe
in the “unchanging I”? *I* like tuna salad. *I*
pay my taxes. *I* possess the rare combination of
linguistic acumen and overall good looks
necessary for probable success
in a career in stand-up comedy.
Are you with me? Is this thing on? Coke or Pepsi?
Starbucks or five more minutes of snooze?
Is that hunk of spacejunk polling at 8%
in Ohio? The one laying fire to the shores of Lake Erie
in mist? Do typos get a resume dismissed?
Have you considered the Peace Corps?
Swapping kidneys for a block
of just-now-molding cheese?
The black market thrives in Acapulco.
The futures market pops on CNN.
Ever bought Coke stock drunk on an Amtrak?
Just point and click on E-Trade’s glowing logo
and ignore the frugal ego staring back at you
from the laptop’s tinted glass.
This is where it feels wrong to say
I’m tickled with the dividends: 3.54 %.
Eat your heart out, Warren Buffet.
I can taste the exponential growth already.

Garage Sale

I stood in the middle of the room and considered which items to sell. Bookshelf: yes. Writing desk: absolutely. *The only thing I could never part with*, I thought, *is this segment of copper piping*. I don't know how exactly I came to own the piping. One day, no piping. The next, there it was on the nightstand next to the clock-radio. I paid it little attention. Went about life. Then I decided to see what the piping could do. First attempt: magic wand. I flailed the piping in the air, pointing it at the object of my desire. Roommate: poof, vanished. Phone bill: now a speckled newt! The power was delicious, but too much to bear. Second attempt: periscope. I held the piping to my eye and saw in an instant above the waves: boats and buoys. Clouds like Darwin's beard. On shore, a cobbler in a lawn chair, slinging chestnuts into the maw of a yawning kangaroo. Third attempt: joystick. I picked up the piping and pulled, lifting the room from its foundation as it, and everything inside it, sailed past phone-lines, roof-peaks, up to the rafters of the cosmos, the bright-black nothingness that hums hot and silent as it expands into the void at an (exponentially) accelerating pace. I carefully replaced the piping on the nightstand and sat, disheartened, on the edge of the unmade bed. I'll never get this garage sale off the ground.