

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Apprenticeship

THESIS

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for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in English

by

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Abstract of the Thesis:

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By

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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?



## 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.