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Christopher Miller

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# THE TOWN HALL IS FILLING WITH BOULDERS

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in English Textual Studies with Honors  
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## Abstract

When I first decided that I wanted to endeavor the realization and composition of a book-length collection of poetry, I had no theme or binding conceptual idea in mind. I saw the thesis project as a chance to create an anthology of work, one that would both map my personal growth as a writer and the distillation of my craft and technique. I knew the poems were going to reach over a period of about two-and-a-half years, so it was clear to me right away that I had no idea where writing would take me, or what iterations my imagination would undergo. This is why I wanted to leave the project as open as possible, and not place any thematic constraints on my process. At the time that I decided to commit myself to this project, I don't think I would have attributed any essentiality or centrality to poetry in my life. Poetry was more of an aesthetic exercise where I felt like I could exercise my natural proclivity to language and its manipulation. Although I originally entered this university as an architecture major, I have always had a passion for the written word. When I coupled this fascination with my spatial and visual understanding, I found that my poetry not only became essential, but brought me closer and closer to a liquid core: a voice that reaches out its neural strings and feels out the histories of our natural world.

In the process of compiling this book, I have not only come to understand myself and my position as a writer, but I have distinguished my critical and stylistic philosophies on what function poetry has in our cultural ecology. I realize that poetry gives me the chance to recover memory, to compile forgotten histories and social instances, to understand and bring closer the people I love, and to map and discover the natural forces that shape and sustain us. In the age of mobile and digital speech, talk is becoming cheap. People are constantly watched by their own incessant discourse, their linguistic surveillance and exhaustion. This leads to our thinning, a telescopic loss of significance and symbolic weight. Poetry gives weight, and clarity back to language. Poetry writes itself on our skin and demands us to remember. Poetry calls back to the bald gaze of the radio tower and the power line with the spoken limits of human struggle, the eternal character of our being. Poetry is at once a tomb and a waking child.

So it is with writing this book that I have come to understand poetry as a spirituality and life force. These poems that I have compiled, loosely in four sections, are only the beginning of what I hope to be a life-long commitment to the exposure and discovery such an art offers. I arranged each fourth to be a room of its own containing: New England lore, metaphysical transformation, The Letter, and finally the global geography and experience of language. There are themes that run throughout all these places, people, dramas, and dreams, but I will leave it to the reader to draw those out and define them for themselves. Poetry offers no conclusion, and if it is to remain something organic and living it must always reach beyond its body. Poetry can instruct us on how to live, but it can also reveal the traps we built and keep building under and over ourselves. As a writer, I understand too that I am entering into a long tradition of poetics, and I know I have a responsibility to all those who I have borrowed from. To them, I hope my work will always be a tribute.

## Accompanying Essay

### *Process:*

I think I should start first with a brief discussion about my approach to the creative process of poetry, and how it has evolved and matured throughout the completion of this thesis project. I want to discuss process as not only an application of craft, but also as an implementation of ideas in a structured form. Because craft is bound up with concept in this way, I will discuss my literal process and my conceptual roots as a writer.

I began writing poetry in my sophomore year in high school, but I can honestly say that it wasn't until my sophomore year in college that I began to consider it as a serious and critical form of communication. This is not to say that I didn't appreciate many of the poems that I read, rather it speaks more to how essential the poetic expression was to my person and well-being. It is interesting to note also that this realization of import almost directly coincided with my attendance in an advanced poetry workshop, which exposed me for the first time to a wide array of responses and interpretations of my work. In short, it instilled in me the vigilant and constant eye of an audience that my privatized writings had never been subjected to. This scrutiny was important for my work, because it was saturated with object, image, and layers upon layers of symbolic weight and metaphor. I built artifices of association, which at times put the reader before the law<sup>1</sup>: an impenetrable, ambiguous, and daunting form. Looking back on my earlier work I don't see a poet at work but a scientist, one who hides behind his hypotheses and experiments. I see

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Kafka's parable of Before the Law, where the law is represented by a large monolithic building, impenetrable to those it summons.

not a humanist but a taxidermist, intent on forcing his criticism and emotional comment through an imbricated brick wall. We all know that this will never work. In the last two years of writing my poetry, I have made a conscious attempt to tear down these projected walls and allow myself to take residence within the page. I have tried to expose myself to what it means to be human, and allow my internal world to walk out into the sun. One motif that I have adopted in order to open up the fabrics of my poems is the dialectic of "you and I," which I use to create a dialogue with the poem, and use characterization as a form of address or invitation. I have realized through looking at my earlier work that poetry must not be a silent space but a sonorous weave that implicates both our common humanity and social responsibility. Poetry makes that which is secret and hidden within the self available to a personal wind. To this wind we must offer up our impediments to decay and absolution.<sup>2</sup>

Of course I can't say that I have completely departed from my earlier negotiations with dense objects and architectonic forms. Many people still call my poems dense, loaded, and ambitious. In the reflection section of my book, I relate this continued insistence on a saturated and almost unfiltered condition to myself as a young child. In so many pictures that I look back on I see myself standing with my arms swung wide open trying to wrap them around the world. I have not grown away from this condition; in fact as you will see in many of my poems I revere the wisdom and perspective of youth. One part of this dense character also comes from

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<sup>2</sup>Then I may hope that my page will possess a sonority that will ring true--a voice so remote within me, that it will be the voice we all hear when we listen as far back as memory reaches, on the very limits of memory, beyond memory perhaps, in the field of the immemorial. All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. Bachelard, Gaston. *Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press: Boston, MA. 1969. pg. 13

both my fascination with spatial composition and awareness, as well as a responsibility I feel that I have to language. As I have pointed out in my abstract, poetry gives weight, density, and clarity back to language. Poetry writes itself on our skin and demands us to remember. Poetry reclaims our appropriated bodies so as to allow us to reside in its charged room.<sup>3</sup> In an age of constant and incessant communication, this is essential. We must tear down our fiber-optic and circulating voices and wrap them around our fists; chant them like spells that infuse us with the power of mythology or magic. These are lasting forces, forces which poetry has made available to me. With the dialectic that I have adopted between the I/you, I have come to understand a unity between the poetic self and my lived identity. Poetry thus allows me to get very close to my only growth, and allows me to produce and re-produce myself at a rapid rate.

When I was abroad over the spring of my junior year, I spent about a week in Paris walking and reading Whitman's, *The Song of Myself*, over and over again on steps and in cafés. I know it sounds hopelessly romantic, but I can say honestly that this was probably the most influential moment in my entire development as a writer. Something about negotiating my American identity and my own cultural and linguistic limits at the moment of this reading allowed me to realize the importance and function of the "I" as a indicator or location of the self within a universal and natural force. If we are to understand our self not as a place of possession or the domain of the "me," then we can open ourselves up to our collective identity that drifts and is shaped by whatever space and spirit that it encounters. This realization

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<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence that the word stanza translates roughly to room in Italian. This too speaks to how I view the function of the form in my work, which is essentially to build complimenting structures around my language and movement. My poetry has also been related to Joseph Cornell's dream boxes, which is another form of spatial definition.

gave my poetic approach an immediate freedom, because it synchronized my cultural and social imagination with the natural processes that have shaped our earth.

Walt Whitman seems to speak with such incredible breadth and wonder because he understands that we live everywhere at once. Each body is a universe, and this universe reaches out for others. His poetic body is a frontier in the truest and most expansive sense. When I approach my self through the people and histories that have composed me, I understand that my body is part of a ploughshare or a back broken from debt. Class stratification, poverty, racial tension, and the war for sexual expression, all have a common front in my skin. As fluid particles of the ever-expanding big bang, we have to recognize movement as our primary identity, as the invention and proliferation of our collective consciousness.

Walt Whitman was no individualist, and neither am I. I understand the myth of individual genius to be one of the greatest delusions invented by man, which allows him to consume and appropriate the earth as if it is a distant other. Out of this impulse is born the cultural paranoia towards death. I agree with Wallace Stevens when he said, “death is the mother of beauty,<sup>4</sup>” or with Stanley Kunitz when he said that, “all lyric tensions stem from the awareness that we are living and dying at one.<sup>5</sup>” All three of these poets have attempted to reclaim the earth, and bind us once again with its processes. If poetry is going to give us the deep breath that so many writers promise, it must give itself up to this collective identity, to this cosmic unity and propulsion.

It is with this breath that I realize "I" am many people living at once: a student in central New York and a sailor who has wandered too far from the sea.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a line from Steven’s most famous poem, *Sunday Morning*

<sup>5</sup> Kunitz, Stanley. *The Collected Poems*. Norton: London, UK. 2000.

The perspective on physical being that I have been discussing could be seen in my work as a fascination with the transformation of form, tense, and temporality. I say temporality especially because I do not subscribe to the monolithic version of a constant and linear chronology, rather I see our existence as essentially polychronic: the simultaneous life of every season in some part of the world. If we are to understand ourselves as multifarious, as stardust that predates our consciousness and our expiration, then almost anything is possible. Death is the mother of beauty in that it makes our earthly experience precious. It cuts through the crass dualism of mind and body and makes us whole, if only temporarily.

So I have digressed a bit from the direct assessment of my process, but I believe that these metaphors, epistemologies, and ontologies are just as much tools for my creative process as pragmatic concerns of representation: like internal rhyme, iambic pentameter, or symbolism. As Theodor Adorno claims in his essay on Franz Kafka (another great poet) we must enter the histories we seek through metaphor.<sup>6</sup> In this method of entrance we allow the text to function on its own context, and inside it we find the possibility for original thought and warmth. It is this warmth that draws me like a moth to the ancient light of the word. Other issues like formal composition and arrangement are usually pushed into some unconscious and distant region of my brain, and I allow them to communicate to me through music and the necessity of a poem's spoken character. So often it is just something like a chair in the middle of a lake, or a red leaf stuck to a diving body that sets me to writing. Maybe it is just one word that has stuck to my ribs that I need to give breadth and force.

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<sup>6</sup> Adorno, Theodor. *Prisms: Notes on Kafka*. Neville Spearman: London, UK. 1977



In my explorations and meditations I try to model the associative unification of dream, memory, and lived experience, and in this way create a real portrait of my personal history. This process is always something like alchemy: a boulder that I crack open and lace with golden ratios. Almost every poem is a metaphysical mining, because I usually have no idea or conception of what it will become when I start. I take something whole, solid, and traveled like the Town Hall and yoke it with some inexplicable phenomenon. Buckminster Fuller once said in an interview that when you measure an object, you change that which you measure. If you look at my description of artifice and image as a form of measuring or mapping, than you can see how I begin to create an entirely new physicality and sense of material. You could call the process that I have described an intuitive approach, which I would agree with partly, but to understand my sense of craft you must remember that a poem is the end of a long process of instruction in philosophical, political, and scientific thought. I am a product of a liberal arts education, and in a way I embody its purpose of de-compartmentalization and interdisciplinary reach. I like to consider myself a socially conscious and devoted person, so with my poems I try to not only excavate myself, but also form a calculated collage of my many critical lenses. Poetry has the power to not only open us up to our own human sensibilities, but also bring closer and make relative the sufferings of others.<sup>7</sup>

***Product:***

At this point I think it would be valuable to address the specific content of

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<sup>7</sup> This makes me think of another important influence of mine, Woody Guthrie. In his verse he imbues story telling and local legend with a sort of universal cognition. He does this in so few words, a brevity that I both admire and aspire too.

my poetry book and how I interpret its organization and poetic position. Since my book is separated into four sections, I will explore each individually and attempt to address themes and fascinations which are a commonality to all.

## Section I: New England

Because I grew up in New England, my imagination and memory has always been connected to its soil. I am very interested in poetry's ability to not only locate and characterize space, but how it can measure and thus essentially shape the landscape it enters. It is in this way that I approach a poem from the perspective of a cartographer or archeologist, because in the act of excavation or tracing a different relationship to history and metaphor can be produced. We discover the buried voices. The stonewall (or its constitutive part, the boulder) is a continual symbol in my writing of when this exhuming translates into a figural drawing upon the Earth. Being the site of the original colonial residence, I have recognized in New England its lived atmosphere a sense of the old world (if there can even be such a thing in America). I try to hold up this sense of age and historical lineage to New England's schizophrenic "other:" the perpetual infant bathing in an ocean of debt, credit, and trade deficits. What is structured through this dialectic of an ancient consciousness and an infantile presence is almost an impossible state overrun with development, decay, and cultural absence. Natural beauty watches over us though, like the White Mountains who protect us and remind us of a geologic pace as we continue our frenetic fray. My education and self-formation is bound up in these dialectics and processes, and it is from this slumbering fall that I was born.

In this section, as well as all the others that follow, I try to express my sensibility to the native force and spirituality that was present in this land long before we arrived. Fetishism is no longer a source of wonder and amazement in the imbedded powers of our surroundings (in the Animist sense) but rather it speaks now to the supernatural status and power of the commodity. I speak from a desire and reverence for local character and legend, and in this way I am very critical of colonialism and its larger global impulse. I see New England as a site of capital's visible laceration, as a calcified hall of wealth and aristocratic ease. I bring the giant men with boulders in as not only a mystical reference to scope and size, but also as manifestations of a spiritual force which seeks to destroy all the obsolete artifices, overpasses, and idol roads. The giant men with boulders signify the destructive force that is at times necessary for hope and vantage: the sight which allows us to seek a singularity outside of the law. This speaks to the paradox Gaston Bachelard mentioned when he said, "in order to suggest the values of intimacy, we have to seduce the reader into a suspended reading."<sup>8</sup> The boulder itself exists in this suspension, as a consolidated record of the earth's decomposition and compression. My poems can only aspire for this type of presence.

Home as a mobile and transfigurable concept is also something that I have tried to identify in my poems, and specifically in this section. Home is a form that is encrypted in our bodies; it is our internal cosmos or heavens. In a way, every poem can be considered a form of primitive shelter or home, for as it builds stanzas upon stanzas (rooms upon rooms), it structures a network of pulsing organs and memories that build a bridge between air and the unconscious, the attic and the cellar.

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<sup>8</sup> Bachelard, pg. 25

Essentially, it creates the psychologized landscape of our childhood, that which it holds in its arms. To truly inhabit New England, to localize my body, is to exist in the ever-present notion of home: the source of all language.

## Section II: A Metaphysical Landscape

In this section I wanted to in part move away from specific place and history, and address the connectivity between internal and external worlds. I begin from the point where the body can be seen as a city itself, much like the concept that William Carlos Williams explores in his epic poem *Paterson*. The city landscape becomes the projected world of memory and internalized speech. Outside of this city landscape, the sites of my poems are usually defined by the psychological conditions of the characters within them. This is another example of the act of measuring that I was speaking of before, for in the measuring of the space of a church naive or a suburban row housing project I am ultimately measuring myself. There also seems to be a fundamental notion of distance that exists between the speakers and their addressed worlds. The sound of our voices, like a ringing church bell, feeds off the space it crosses and takes on the form of its travel. We experience in that basic and received vibration a carried and characterized distance: the surface of a snowy lake, the barred forest of defoliated trees. In my poems I speak to this form of human experience, where the body is made into a pure instrument of perception and movement, where it becomes a bell.

As in the last section, I am dealing with a similar relationship to history, although in this section I deal more with performative histories that resist parabolic

quality of myth and settle somewhere near a moral foundation. Again, the men with boulders make an entrance to stir up the light in our salons and riverbeds. Here I could offer another definition of my poetic process: a photographic film that reveals, through slow exposure, the sedimentary load of those who give us water.

### Section III: Letters

During the Fall semester of my senior year, right around when I started reading a lot of Kafka, I got very interested in the function of the letter and how it addresses our relationship to information. Almost every poem is a meditation on the ability for the letter to negotiate natural, national, and emotional boundaries. Most of these letters are part of a project that I embarked on where I decided that I wanted to write a letter back to all the places I traveled when I was abroad in Europe (or at least the most influential). I did this not only as a method of remembering, but as an alternate form of documentation to the diary, a form that I find incapable of preserving the full character of experience. Into these (re)imagined sites I complexified my memory by introducing an undefined passenger, the "you," who I address as a loved other: the difference I can never breach. This person was never named, and in this way the experience of love and travel can never be fully elucidated.

The Letter too is an intimate gestural plane where we script ourselves in the path of communication. The Letter speaks to how our physical being and presence is disseminated and received from invisible and mute recorders. In the hall of the dead letters I feel like we find so many cures for common diseases, as well as so

many envelopes snake bitten by loss. The “I” or the “he” of The Letter “does not simply take the place traditionally occupied by a subject; as a moving fragmentation, it changes what we mean by place.”<sup>9</sup> In this quote Maurice Blanchot was speaking about the narrative voice in Kafka, but I believe that it works well to describe the speaker of many of my poems. The Letter also exists in what Blanchot calls “simultaneous plurality, that exists as both the place from which he will always be lacking and which will thus remain empty.... a place that is always too much.”<sup>10</sup> He summarizes this condition of existence as a swarming state of hypertopy. If you look at the complexity and internal ecology that is involved, I am negotiating many of these same narrative conditions and concerns. How do I describe a history from which I will always be absent, or how do I approach a Letter that I never expect anyone to receive? This is the diversely unoccupied place, the thread of surplus information which is woven again and again within itself. Hypertopy is at once an impossible context and the only viable way for me to approach some sense of totality of the past and present. Let me offer a another successive definition: The Letter delivers a poet to the flickering and animal walls of a cave.

#### Section IV: Language as Pure Movement

In this final section, most of my recent writing is contained, and what I have found is that my interests have shifted largely towards technology and how the media’s we interact with shape our lives. I build off of the temporal nodes of the

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<sup>9</sup> Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays. Station Hill Press, inc.: Barrytown, NY, 1999. pg. 465

<sup>10</sup> Blanchot, pg.465

letter and approach a greater network of transportation that we feed on: intimate smells, spiritual inheritance, antennae's, and even political figures. This section is where I perform my contrast of linguistic density and the immaterial quality of communication the most. Here I am illustrating an inherent contradiction in the cybernetic forming of our bodies: the greater access to information and voices that we obtain the more we are confronted by our own isolation and obsolescence. Tangible communities are subjugated to larger imagined communities, such as nations, and the brotherhoods that we base the foundations of our lives upon crack and fizzle like transformers. As thick as we build our gauges, the weight and depth of human sorrow and triumph will never flow, for these are moments that must be inhabited as a kingfisher inhabits an ocean. These poems urge us to a human balance that lives beside the white ring of our telephonic skeletons.

I am not some kind of Ludite who disavows the importance of technological advancement, because that is not the case, rather I see a great spiritual persuasion in the idea of pure movement. For me, this all goes back to Walt Whitman who in his definition of an American Spirit, was already climbing into a metaphorical existence where the past and present are instantly redeemable. The advantage of living through our media, of becoming signaled bodies, is that we can witness transformation at a rapid and pellucid pace. Of course all of these scaffoldings and wires are rooted in the earth, and in this fact I always try to observe the inter-relationship between this vast acoustic dream and its green waking. The poetic reality is this: in a poem you can wrap your skin around regions unforeseeable, but always you must return to the daily negotiation of visceral and basic concern.

**Conclusion:**

Poetry offers no conclusion. It must always be viewing as a process, as a watering hole where we must both go to drink and give thanks. Poetry is my messianic time, the world redeemed and cast astray as the pulpy fibers condense. Poetry is no science and can never become a science, for that is a different world entirely. As a young writer, as someone who still feels like his legs are looming over an unimaginable ocean, I could never be so audacious to claim a bottom line, a definitive comment. I have learned so much about myself and the world throughout this poetic process, and I know that I still have so much to seek. Every day I am tempted towards the magnificent eye of voice and making. Both a curse and its ameliorative spell have stunned my body, and will flow in my blood from this day forth. I want to thank all those who have helped me with this project, and all those who will read and rest in my poetic time. I know that I demand a lot from my readers, but you must believe that I demand that much and more from myself. Just seeing and witnessing the world is a great enough challenge for me, and I can only hope that I will be forever humbled and made kind by the forces I call upon.