In The Prepositional State

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IN THE PREPOSITIONAL STATE

by

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
In The Prepositional State

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Noah Eli Gordon

In The Prepositional State is a collection of poems representing three years of graduate work in poetry. The poems have been influenced by a range of poets including Michael Gizzi, George Oppen, Barbara Guest, Jack Spicer, Rae Armantrout, and Ted Berrigan, among others. Moved by politics, art, community, and Judaism, In The Prepositional State attempts to enact a poetics where poetry is knowing: the process of coming to knowledge through the poem. But final arrival, an anchoring of the known, seems impossible. Maybe the space of the poem can’t sustain the determinacy it aims for. I once believed that poetry is an aggregate of knowledge—empirical, inductive, emotional—contained in the self, but over time my thinking changed. The implied authority of such a poem was eroded in place of the uncertainty and doubt that’s been there all along. Self knowing. Empirical knowing. Emotional knowing. Each is a present participle and remains so. Each is the poem’s attempt in a given moment to understand itself.
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Diameters Of Spring

Diameters of spring
far-flung and out of reach,
bone cold in low-lying city.

The year in pictures.
The button shop’s name.
Falsehood & Fixation.

Wearing 3D glasses
in the right theater
for the wrong movie.

Unimpressed and ridiculous
with strangers in a dark room
close minded or close together.

That delinquency of feeling
at home. I am home. I’ve returned
without rehearsing my return.

Not in front of this audience,
Not in front of this bouillabaisse.
Not in front of this river.

I hide my croissant
when the seagull alights,
but not from the seagull.
Dark  Dark  Goose

Luggage arrives in the world where it waits.

A false sense of facility.

Crowding ghosts of ownership.

Victim skies.

The accident viewed from on high is the accident inside.

For a slower life
delicate and bestial
take the no-way home,
past tense humor
into zephyr night’s
distended gut.

What remains possible is levitation,
an inflated heart in free fall.
Outlets Surge Into Chance

From each vibration a proximity of shock.  
We are suggested.  
Of time and place an era of humming,  
becoming hum.  
Electrical.  
Every storm splits a tree onto a car.  
Indistinguishable from a distance, accidents.  
The Honda threatens the ravine.  
Cage prepares  
   a heart in the cavity  
   a thought in the cavern  
our insides with trinkets

We is a suggestion.  
Anything unseen needs evidence.  
A crushed velvet armchair.  
A hearth warmth.  
A witness.  
Sobriety is in the forest, so I’m told  
to write differently is a disservice to trust.  
This chair can hold two people  
though not at once.
In Default Of A Screen I Stare At Living Things

Large glasses frame her face behind the windshield.  
Motionless she fills an exaggerated canvas.  
Were wonder borne out the crenellated glass.  
Wires from above carry the image elsewhere.  
Painters make a gift box for the disquiet of dealing light  
   as a starting point out of one’s control feeding it.  

Maybe to the crows then.  
It is only natural.  
It is only fitting.  
That this too on an early morning sidewalk divided by trees  
drives into wires where nothing entangles except:  
what season is it?

I know I know her that knowing  
is an apprehension of patterns consumed in hunger.  
The chair wobbling into deduction falls  
and I have left the accident for my own.  
To be tipped off. Frayed shirt bottoms. Holy garb  
like this thought whose function escapes me.  

I call Alex Katz in Maine and commission a portrait.  
Of you? He asks after asking how I got his number.  
I got lucky pressing my palm against all the buttons.  
I have a smart phone. That’s suspicious—of you? No  
the girl in the wreck, I don’t know where she is now.  
She’d like to know when you’re coming.  
She didn’t see the car coming, for example.
Disaster Comedy

1.
the natural disaster
or the unnatural
enacted by a person
as unhinged as the door
knocked down
during an invasion
of sorts—or a sortie
of wind, climate fury.

Maybe like some jokes
you have to be there
but not too soon
to underestimate
the hurricane’s strength,
its capacity
to acquire our names.

2.
from the far reaches of worry

sitting on a tarmac
during a lightning storm

into fundamentalist weather

absolute nature, I mean
irreconcilable faith.

3.
“There is a bomb on the plane”
so we know because it is written
on a cocktail napkin
in a movie
and passed to a flight attendant.

There is no this plane
riverbed
burning home
of urgency in sudden gravity—gravitas
extra letters mean
all the time in the world
I don’t know well enough, I know
directness, blind side
sucker punchline
punch

some questions sound
like a joke prompt:

why is this happening?

3.
To get to the other side.

Humor is insensitive
but not insincere,
sometimes it has
all the levity of an angel
and anvil at once.
Like disasters or virgins
it’s all about timing
and history, prophecy
and wind.

4.
A state of emergency
is declared
a state of empathy
in threes a state
of dread as if
the disaster has gone on
too long, or its sequence.

5.
I am courting
a disaster pathology,
circling the perimeter
of a park
until something—
a dog
a tree
a bureaucracy
—happens
as it should as if
it’s been happening

6.
I’m running out
of not having enough
money to give
an epicenter
or childhood
catching me off guard

7.
Too often the image
of villagers heading for hills
for a view of their village
flooding in the midst
of a diluvial reckoning, look
there’s the water damaged Bosch print
floating next to the joke book.
Take my disaster, please
I made it up
with the certainty it exists
here at least and one day.
After Your Errands I Am Home

After your errands I am home
listening to Nico Muhly
worrying the outside
wishing I was agoraphobic and cerebral
and all the seedlings in the garden
were agoraphobic too
and listened to classical music
understanding none of it
but rather this harmonic cat gut life
than emerging green then what?

Ivy around the reminder.

Order is with us
a green body lives vicariously
anchors and grows
centrifugally

becomes a terrorist
becomes a tree.
An Ascending Car Counterbalances A Descending Car

The time-thin wine glass wasn’t 
(away) long for this world. 
It’s this way.

Landing one-legged 
at a border crossing 
Portbou

where the philosopher died 
overlooking a small mountain, 
overcome.

* 
When I turn over 
you are laughing 
and sleeping.

One should never wake 
a laughing dreamer.

It is dangerous 
more dangerous 
than three unspeakable things.

* 
Nightly the daredevil 
leaps dozens of burning cars.

Orchestra pits. 
Fire escapes. 
Every secret.

* 
As a child I was scared 
of sleep’s lost hours.

Now you tell me 
I mutter no (no) 
before I wake.
*  
Luggage arrives in the world where it waits.

On a clear day
precipitous drops
are rainfall and
oxygen masks.

The glass building anchors the sky it reflects.
Our Introductory Offer Comes To An End

Etiquette demands us of us

The lowest common denomination

Tense communiqué

Tensile spine

Posture better suited

Bowing near a wall

Burning in a chair

The river’s unknown tributary all along is the river

Monks fever in the abbey

Sound squats in the broken harp

Hands wave from windows

And everything plows shift

Snow path    fallen limbs    assembly under glass
A Dull Lighthouse Offers No Beacon

No ships come this way
and the ocean is true
as its appearance
on an unsigned postcard,
hocking its waves.

There is a drier place where
Richard Feynman lies on his car
waiting for the air to incinerate.

Physicists on Sand.

Poets on Earth.

Streetcars in Rotterdam.
The Darker The Room The Larger It Is

Misunderstanding secret meetings
in ski towns, sudden accents,
inflections in the penthouse.
As long as I ask I’ll never know
who lives there.

Hide-and-go edge
through windows framing
the private somersaults of tenants
challenging the status quo
of moving between rooms.

A reclusive (there there) now.

There’s room for reinvention
not necessarily a room for it.
Sometimes we return where we started.

Greece might still return
to the dragma. Bad news
for the spanakopita vendor.
Good for the wooden
donkey puppet maker
who is not wooden
but I understand

alternatives pass before us
like momentary ghosts
in gasp movies
who whisper Sisyphus
grab some milk
on your way back
to the house.
A Large Tent In Which

Bolts of yellow silk flap over the river
impart mysteries of use
and meaning. Say see the way
textures make it.

An adlib of that democratic feeling.

Dancing is sporadic knee scrape
sovereign in the aspic
of occasion

as thumbs thrum on banquet tables
a percussive lineage
of Roman emperors.

He lives or he dies.
The nest is well made or it falls apart.
I’ve killed every bonsai tree I’ve owned.

All were gifts.
My Seven Tarsal Bones Are Laid Out

Glare made sun where the window
lights up marrow sucked down.

Sibelius betrays the strangeness.
Dense freedoms unroll like new carpet.

What else: a distinction.
What else: a disarray.

Each piece is tagged left to right
out of sequence.

Dense freedoms unroll like new carpet
reviving the old room’s yellowed walls.

I obey all splay havens
all heavens of inaction.

I shake a nearby gourd for
the slogan its seeds make.

Luggage arrives in the world where it waits.

In Ainola there is only winter.

I’ve never been.

The square outside is quiet with the hope of tanks.
is hunger

Baltic white sand     Pine tree armature     Conifer angst

To stay green through tide
    where amber washes up
Entraps

What kind of ship     What kind of beach home

There is a view of land from anywhere

Seeing land from a spaceship
    finds a far off gravity

Seeing it from land
    is farther off still
is fast
knowing

The velocity of prayer
in a vacuum

Torpor garments     Defunct passports
teasing their way

    Into custom   Into culture

A made food a made man into the bed made thin
is fast
slow retinue

A retainer of time in the mouth

Teeth fall out in a dream  Teeth fall out at the dinner table

Such that
  the lines are blurred
Such that
  eyes well up
       and must be drained

A distant grasp  A grapple  A front row  A snowed in half-life

There is a wormhole in the room that ants march out of

As if the doldrum were an instrument
is hunger motionless

Apprehension of the day
caught in passing
bundled up to the neck

I’ve had it up to silence with here

I speak enough for both of us
and then some

The rest I keep in a false board

Hollow

I start with an idea of what art should be and work my way backwards
is fast irrelevance of Hasidic tales
undone by unknowable magic

This happened here
  begs the question of sequence
Be written into the book of life
  and just walk away
Dust-driven into distance

On roads one encounters the edge of all things known
  not them the words that suffice for memory
  that memory is the worst word for

Worse for wear
  write it instead

Ink well marginal gloss of the shiny state

  What kind of hallow          What kind of prophet
is fast fabric
    rent with its gaping
    a mourner’s eye

My vision is fine though losing it
doesn’t follow I know loss

Floorboard aporia

What is beneath here

Bodies        Treasure

That they are incompatible is a sense I can’t shake

That I am poor of grief is a run-away wealth
is hunger commandment

I think of you often in view of freight ships

Inside the pallet boxes of crooked noses dumped into the ocean

On the surface of water is a forgotten shape
is fast

drivel dark

the ember trough

blue-tip match
is hunger

the punctuality of letters

A prison story I can’t tell this is not the place
A line not a bar
  a bar composed of many close set

There are things one can take
The piano not the correspondence

What floats in water  What glides in air

A sirocco sweeps words into a dry trace

In far off countries breeze carries reason

The gavel calling to order all things out
is hunger grumbling

Only makes sense  Only makes belief

The construction gone on too long

Hooded let’s stalk a perimeter of sound
    and spire raised in frigid campaigns

I cannot get to Yaklichi this way

In my lap a wind torn hand to hammer with

I cannot find miracle row
is fast
pattern recognition

An even spacing of screws along a thin metal sheet
The wall paper’s paisley woods
Coffee circles burnt into the tables randomly

But is not random any human made event

   Even humans  Even space
is fast
   a gathering of lateness
Rope light illumination
A glass disappears from the table
   or is taken away the saucer too the dirty spoon
I have only a film canister by my leg
   labeled with ink on masking tape
Materials
As in everything what defines a finish
is fast

Grey instruction
Mapping into back country

That hidden place   That heart stir

The greater brunt of confusion
   in second grade cursive
An illegible hand against the bark

It depends where you aim to end and deepen through
A cherry stain in the discarded wood

Orthographic Roanoke

If you disappear in the forest and there’s no one there to see it
is hunger
boots tap
a steel etude

An exercise in expiation
The parade in commemoration of a march
into the vanishing street

Everyone levitates
All the flags are still
Then the water main breaks

So much for preparation        So much for the committed speech
is fast

Refusal of entry
into the conclave
Roof smoke

In secret corridors the cabal meets
A script where the writing takes place
passes around an offering plate for letters

After a secession of questions feel free to supplement

    Dates and raincoats   Days and rain
is hunger

an arrangement of propositions
is fast

Blueprint prophecy

A place exists nowhere if written first
  into the quiet of a room
It’s not the room
  incapable of memory

  It’s the floorboard  It’s the baseboard  It’s the people

looking out

an open window

at the oracle draft
is fast
disavowal of wind

Tramontane gust
Resistance distills into the surface

A French figurine braces against the gale cast in position and braces against again

What force  What coast
is hunger

The room full of itself

Designed for the economist
    Figures

Is there an incentive
    Every bulb has burned out after a day
Is there a cost analysis
    One person has passed out and the rest on their way

She reaches for a simpler apparatus

    An abacus    A blindfold
is hunger use
or none of it

Usefulness

He never made money on his narrative
but everyone else did

The pastry chef emerged from the competition

The only thing left

body of the dress  a flower  a small ribbon curl
is fast

Who is speaking  Who is speaking through

The deep end more shallow now

I’ve committed my resources
to being saved and sound

The rest is another’s breath
is fast

Subtitles in the foreign film
Readers mouth in the dark theater
    unafraid of being caught out

At times there’s a plot to dig into

As here on the field
    they chase each other
    mumbling inaudibly

    She says I’m unsure where the well is    He says there’s no wall here
is hunger perched
    on the armchair
    listening

No
Say it again
What you dream most

    Wonder
No
Say it again

    Wonder
No
Say again

The airport is quiet as far as the tarmac stretches a chorus sings

No
is fast

A stoa revived
  in the bombed out interior
  of an open shelter

My brother carried
  in protest over
    hallowed ground

A place worth

  Its limestone in song   Its violence in quarry

Touched upon a grand hollow
is fast

Night pestle  Self portraiture

Coming to in the museum built for light
in a chair under the awning of it

This piece made on commission
This one on doubt

We call the water mark an aphorism
   for the succinct way it calls out to us

We call it commandment
is fast writing

Into mute-struck fear
  a stroke
    of arid land
is hunger removal

An abscess    A growth

Obsession
  with the foreign nature of things

Pastry shells    Bomb shelters    Centigrade comfort
is fast

Stepping barefoot
into the yard
after the rain
Worms flood out
between the toes

Not a soil to sneak into only to be ushered back into heat

Spring yeah Summer yeah

Some season is upon us
like a warning
a derring-do

I worry if I spend too much time in the sun
I will notice a plague of locusts and no one
will believe me

How did you get so dark
is fast

I
will
not
eat
I
will
not
work
is fast willing

Endurance   Waiting

Watching a teapot
   the size of your concern
   on the stove

   Totality   Totality

Making a thing out of this
   Don’t make a thing out of it

I
will
is fast

Altitude creates isolation
Are those your tracks out back
    they look like you

Flies attend to the midday cabin

    Music for an art film    Music for a fireplace

A hammering inside the radiator precedes the echo cast beyond it

Linoleum reflects the propane flame

Maybe imagining a pine brocade
    wasn’t as helpful as I imagined
    getting away

These tracks lead in one direction
    towards the lake
    then back
is fast

Roof tile balance

Curvature is the challenge

Any arch      Any order

Gravity sworn children at street level
        What I’m doing is dangerous

There’s a glass of water
    in the wheelbarrow below

A
leap
of
faith
is hunger the word for feeling like you miss something
you’ve missed before

What’s the feeling
for missive

Enclosed you’ll find a photograph of me next to the falls

And another of the falls alone
The Mountain Thus Changed Into A Bucket

In the history of the universe no bucket has been harder to envision or step into.

*To traverse the whole, to touch the depth of being, is to awaken the ambiguity coiled inside.*

Like an intestine.

*You are not lucid but are already a history.*

Okay.
Civic Engagement

*after Levinas’ Fifth Talmudic Lecture*

I wish North Africa and the Middle East the best, but am no more an activist than someone who swam once ten years ago is a swimmer, of course I know how to swim even almost drowned in a wave pool, and wandered hung over into a rally for gay marriage in New York and listened to a speaker, acutely aware there’s no such activism as the practice of wandering with a headache through a city. And attended a Wisconsin solidarity gathering in Denver but did not wear Badger-red. And went without a tent to an Occupy protest on a temperate Saturday. And walked sober into an art gallery with every intention of going. And before the war protested once. And after the war twice. I know how to act. A classmate made the print *Times* getting beat by a cop. He went to Seattle to protest. I went to Colorado for poems. Colin made the digital *Times* staring down the same cop in Zucotti Park. I made the sidebar staring blankly at a gentrifying Crown Heights. For Levinas, there was something intrinsically Jewish about the revolutionary consciousness. The conjunction is as important as the rudder in a dangerous river, he said and I know what he means the rudder’s failure becomes a solitary swim back to the coast in solidarity with oneself. Survival remains unattended and unanded, the poem as important as the writer in a dangerous river upon which a city is built and opposed.
Richard Goldstone Surrounded By A Hedge Of Heliotropes

Twenty-three judges sit in a semi-circle.

Three rows of twenty-three students in front of them.

I am in the back row.

If the judges are divided by one vote, the first student in the first row is called up.

And the second, and third, until a decision is made by two.

What happens to one.

Unless the sixty-ninth student is called, then a divided court can decide by one.

There are two court recorders.

One for the plaintiff.

One for the defendant.

And a third for both.

Such that testimony is assured and each recorder is a witness.

And it follows a reader too.

The judges sit in a semi-circle.

Faces confirm each other.

All of us inside the enclosure that remains, as it has for some time, a seduction of faces.

So I am distracted.

So information is lost.

So we are not in Jerusalem, which doesn’t exist the way we wish, but that’s true for ourselves too.

And social reform. And the Knicks. And families.

And the Ancient Sanhedrin which doesn’t exist at all anymore.
And the virtual Sanhedrin with its many judges and students dispersed into the consciousness of Richard Goldstone.

Goldstone sits beside the portal of the enclosure.

I think of it because it is the first thing.

Goldstone, as you may tell from his name, is South African.

You can dispute this if you like.

There are things that are always disputed but remain indisputable.

Space.

Land.

Feeling.

Goldstone is the high priest cutting through the hedges of space land and feeling.

While I’m distracted in the last seat of the back row.

Barely hiding myself from the others who look ahead while I look down.

Goldstone can’t see it.

And enclosure remains, as it has for a long time, a seduction of faces.

Where everyone knows their place in relation to who can see them.

The case is about disproportionate power.

I recuse myself.

I j’accuse myself.

And take upon myself a distress that is not mine.

Existential, yes.

These are the concerns this far back.

Attention is disproportionate.

Unleavened bread is disproportionate.
The universe is disproportionate to our capacity for understanding it.

And Israel is in the same flotilla.

You can dispute this, too.

Many readings are possible.

Part of the testimony of readers.

Who read it back to impartial Richard Goldstone.

Who nods in agreement and shifts in impartial solitude.

Who is alone and unenviable and has no one to talk to.

And calls me up ahead of the others and questions me.

For my indiscretion.

For my indolence.

*Who’s on trial?*

Eudoxes of Cnidus?

Maimonedes?

I don’t know.

*Well, what do you know?*

I can’t reconcile my strong feelings for the Knicks with my inattention to their season.

But I’m affected anyway.

*Thank you, you may go.*

As I move towards the portal

Richard Goldstone reaches for the flower that pulls away towards the sun.
Theory On Vastness

There is no way to surprise vastness

No lurking in it and in it no emptiness

Really it should be called encompassness

But I didn’t make the language I misuse

It was given to me like so many people

sticks

burrs

tribal light
Harsh Climate Has Come

Harsh climate has come, a tune
the fiddler makes sliding down shingles.

It’s hard to dance without someone’s
shadowed steps carved into cement

(though not impossible)

you said so yourself,
referring to something else.

Quiet meditation.
An adulation of strings.

Who controls a sentence?
Who shovels the snow?

The answer looks out a dormer window
at the tops of stems.

There’s the grip weather has on your music.
There’s the stent that fails inside what it holds.

A living stunt.
An emergence room.
In The Prepositional State

A boy stands at the podium
reading the names of the dead
in order of nation and name.
This is not an order of death,
it is an order of reading.
He is reading the names of the living.
Did you hear your name?
Such questions curve away

from intelligibility towards an abandoned temple.
A place for doubt as sounding the depth of speech.

In the prepositional state
I walk to where first things are
a “forced march with a scattered end”
as in a Russian posture everything conjugates:
  the spine along with the table it is atop or under
  the sprain suffered reaching across the conjurer’s wave.

Some days no names come,
instead a patch of color,
green reveals green in hiding.
What origin proves.
Paint behind itself.
Paint before itself.

**

As if an instance of magic isn’t fire catching
discarded sweaters, gloves, et al
on the lawn bed. Warmth without articles
then an irreverent grammar.
Some days no breeze comes
nor a glance in edgewise. People run into the street
screaming Josephine!
Josephine!
till she is found to be elsewhere if elsewhere at all.

A man walks over and digs his hand into his pockets.
I see.
A disappearing act.
Fear instills itself then makes itself still.
I know.
I can go inside or I can go home.
Point Of Interest

It is a public service
to stare down the starving gorge

where leaves alight on some house with a view.
A paramedic suggests a throat hole
to speed the air in after it.
A proper name for the fern trough

an antifreeze band leaks into
and pools color, ablution.

My features are vestigial
when coming into contact with another’s.

When a pebble does in a windshield
the accident is understood

as logical as physics as painless as accidental
as time as fabled as fairness as understanding

as removing leaves lodged in a book on them.
It is the first thing I think

sitting outside chewing a quotidian croissant
sipping coffee in a park watching other dogs.

Kite sky a shine I call
mogul glow glinting off fenders

of parked cars on a rotary
curving away and returning

as mountain road as trailer bed as airborne freight as quiet
as morning as garden as open as dander as silt

gravel corridor through a state road.
Seasonal skein and inevitable skid,

I cram each mordant thought
into the glove box with the atlas.

The ambulance waits on the shoulder
for a combustible event
one wrong turn into a scenic outlook
another into reflection. I confess

spiritual discomfort with the steep incline ahead
childhood nausea and steel kitchen sink

is to say everything I haven’t read
or by chance passed over or into

appearing in the open
with no disturbance.

I come again to a rest stop
not without trepidation not with it

as mirror image as trap door as writing desk as dashboard
as dormant as ceramic mug as comfort as orbit as somewhat
Poem For Collin Schuster

A totem for your thoughts
carved out of naming,
the garden you claim
goes green in your mouth.
In that moment,
puppeteers on stilts
advance the whole art.

I avoid the spectacle,
rubber neck
or stammer’s revision
of the alphabet.
My thumb sticks
from the shoulder,
like an unnoticed flare.

No one will stop.
I arrive at your door.

*

Snow yes and we lost
some good branches out there.
Your basement of books
and battery box of rainwater,
indices toward turning
any language in lathe.
Tomorrow will again
land crystals on your tongue
and remark, revolt
the amperage,
power out and in
threshold as any hyphen
regards itself
a secret tunnel between gates.

*

Quarters and crystals
between couch cushions,
instruments for scratching
names into lotto tickets.
“We were here once”
like Puritan settlers gone missing.
Winters are hard.
The rug gets pulled out from under
our impressions of dying actors in elaborate costumes.
Late stage cataclysm.
And the words are raked.
Concision eventually materializes as a black hole. I look back on these years as period piece, where everyone spent their time.

You are not the private genius, you are the public heart.
Light Years

What looks up
as a choice doubting itself
pushes up
an adamant worry site,
terror shorn to shy away
from crowds invoking
dream logic
fire work.

Sound comes from a different topiary
owning up to something else, quiet
maybe, or hello
emollient alleyway, oh
this isn’t the meaning of citizen
I come close to.

Stranger droves in the seeing
and saying something least city.

*

Villains arrived from villas,
I always wanted to live in one.
Now what, another dashed
golem-tablet
pacifist-frieze
standing unmoved and waiting
as a storefront mannequin or monk.

For stretches at a time avenues extend
and losing oneself becomes monastic.

Across the Sullivan Street playhouse
Richard Gere’s shrine was visible
but I never saw it.

*
Totemic:
a rapid spread of wholeness through a neighborhood,
whole-hearted advance in the heart
of the worry wart.
Vertigo stroll on a sunny day.

I am wrong about a fact
that much I know
and hide under
law ornament
gnomic malaprop.

*

How’s it going?

Like an epistemological crap shoot.
Like an entropic salmon run.

How about you?

For a long time now
I’ve been in search of a machine.
I’ve thought about it,

I don’t think the world is against me
I don’t think it’s with me either.

*

One observation at a time,
diligent and delicate,
each one a booby-trapped
blue-footed keepsake,
pointing to itself years ago.

That’s how light works.
Things have happened that haven’t
reached us quite yet.
The plaza where everyone gathered
for a change that hasn’t happened.

Oh,
light years
not light.
Object Universe Model

after Spicer

It’s no one’s fault I spell the end of things
difficult space moorings.

I address the pinholed cardboard box
Hello ball, and peak at the eclipse.

A real eclipse in a collage.

Anachronistic nationhood.

Vodka-soaked space age.

Some adjectives you just cannot reach.

*
A transitional object is a teddy bear or thought
or the Copernican doubt of an unused telescope
in my parents’ basement gathering dust.

*
An astronomer who never saw
any one land on any thing.
A pilgrim of gas light, that cosmic
flirtation with disaster and colony.

Fear of a planetary kerfuffle.

Fear of explaining what we mean by that.

*
According to the planetarium’s scale I am moon heavy,
Mars light, less of a gravitational burden.

Somewhere where this problem doesn’t exist I’d like to introduce it:

the space body mind chromosomal conundrum
the nation-logos-breath conundrum
the manqué-state heritage-speaker conundrum

In space a satellite falls out of favor with the world it orbits.
*  
I find their passports and think  
spies or astronauts, failed poets or readers.

There is a more believable narrative about information.  
A Cold War silo in Nebraska waiting to be unearthed.

*  
I take it you are here to see me move

silence orchard
alien orbit

I take it you are here to see me.
Telescopic View Of A Space Where Nothing Writes Itself

I am diving too, a junket
to salvage cast-off goods
and sleep,
the refurbished thought factory.

In the Stone Age we could not think
of factories the way we can’t think
of telepathic thinking.
Evolutionary wisdom,
the wonder wheel was the wheel
and what wonder was
I couldn’t say.
Statement of Poetics

I. Knowing & Doubt

Poems begin with necessity and uncertainty, the necessity of writing them and the uncertainty of where they will go. Having an idea or phrase or word to spur writing predicts little of the finished poem’s concerns. When I began writing “An Ascending Car Counterbalances A Descending Car” I was following “funicular” from a Barbara Guest poem into the dictionary. With the definition I found title and an objective correlative but I lacked the correlation. If the poem works it is because the “counterbalance” of physical tension (I imagine the cars straddling a mountain peak) resonates with the tension between wakefulness and sleep, which is meanwhile tied to the globetrotting Guest’s poems invoke. But these are connections I could not have known before the poem’s writing or even during it.

Poetry is knowing: the process of coming to knowledge through the poem. But final arrival, an anchoring of the known, seems impossible. It’s possible the space of the poem can’t sustain the determinacy it aims for. I once believed that poetry is an aggregate of knowledge—empirical, inductive, emotional— contained in the self, but over time my thinking changed. The implied authority of such a poem was eroded in place of the uncertainty and doubt that’s been there all along. Self knowing. Empirical knowing. Emotional knowing. Each is a present participle and remains so. Each is the poem’s attempt in a given moment to understand itself.

A long-time influence, George Oppen said it better: “We write to find what we believe and what we do not believe. There are things we believe or want to believe or think we believe that will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem.” That these things “will not substantiate themselves” does not mean they aren’t true, rather it’s inconsequential whether or not they are. A poem is not a proof for an argument or a position even though arguments and positions may exist in one. Such gestures exist only for the duration of the poem and confer little of their conclusions as viable commentary
on the outside world. But the outside world, at times as complex as political machinations
or simple as sudden snow in April, informs the poem at every stage.

If the poem does not impact the world that informs it, if it only receives, then is it a
solipsistic exercise? Is it a parasite? If a poem is written in a forest and there’s no one
there to hear it does it make a sound? The truth is I don’t know how to measure the
impact of poetry or a single poem on anyone other than myself. There is no available
metric for the far-reaching and slow-moving power of poems. Politics, art, community,
information, friendship, Judaism—these all inform my poems and when I write I am
brought closer to their concerns. They feel, somehow, important, and were it not for my
intervention in their production they might even be so to someone else. Writing,
therefore, is a sincere appeal to the cultures that inform our quotidian days. And that is
the necessity. The necessity of writing is the necessity of sincere engagement.

II. Sincere Engagements

I’ve noticed “sincerity” popping up frequently in interviews and articles which leads me
to believe it has become something of a loaded word. Since I’m using it here and it
probably diffused into my thinking because of its frequency, I will try to quickly situate
myself in the sincerity argument as I’ve found it. The term’s usage is not so different
from the way Lionel Trilling defined it in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971) as “a
congruence between avowal and actual feeling” but with the advent of the New Sincerity
“movement” the congruence has become a gesture associated with staid definitions of
“Beauty” and “Truth.”1 I seek out the sincerity of a poet’s engagement in the poem.

1 The term originated in “Eat Shit!: A Manifesto for the New Sincerity” (2005) by Joseph Massey and was
intended as a joke. Joke or not, it caught on. Poet Matt Hart has outlined New Sincerity’s concerns as
poetry’s need “to utilize the experimental muscle of the last century to move beyond mere experimentation
and instead start amounting to something—something fully beautifully human.” By virtue of the contrast
Hart offers between “mere experimentation” and “something fully beautifully human” he presumes that
experimental work lacks the sincerity of more fully human ancestors like Keats, Rimbaud, and Corso. Such
determinations are flawed because they reinforce a false reading of “sincere” poets as a bunch of tear-eyed
walkers taken with flower petals. It also presumes that gushing approbations and enchantments represent a
more virtuous engagement with the poetic act than more measured appeals to experience. In fact, the whole
New Sincerity approach strikes me as an anti-intellectual stance.
Does it seem to take its concerns seriously? This does not mean there can be no irony or humor, rather that the appearance of an ironic tone might be the one with which to engage the content of the poem. Admittedly, if the only exposure one has to a poet’s work is a single poem it can be difficult to gauge sincerity. One has to read closely, get to know the poems as one gets to know people. Ultimately, the judgment is subjective. The first of Oppen’s “Five Poems” crystallizes the difficulty of distinguishing between the sincere and false approach.

The question is: How does one hold an apple
Who likes apples

And how does one handle
Filth? The question is

How does on hold something
In the mind which he intends

To grasp and how does the salesman
Hold a bauble he intends

To sell? The question is
When will there not be a hundred

Poets who mistake that gesture
for a style.

Sincerity of the Engagement: George Oppen and Michael Gizzi

The poems collected in In The Prepositional State, specifically those in the section “Diameters of Spring” have been influenced by George Oppen and Michael Gizzi. Oppen’s touchstone book Of Being Numerous (1968) has long been an influence on my poems and thoughts about poetry. Gizzi’s influence is more recent and can be traced to his last book New Depths of Deadpan (2009. At first glance, they could not be more different: Oppen’s Objectivist ethos seemingly clashes with Gizzi’s wry and disjunctive sensibilities, but both poets ultimately represent a sincere poetic engagement.
"Of Being Numerous" opens with lines that I consider an ethical imperative: “There are things/we live among ‘and to see them/ Is to know ourselves.’” Things that can be seen are not necessarily visible, but the drive towards both senses of vision—perception and prophecy—is a province of poetry. It’s one I’d like to live in, though the lines suggest it’s not so simple. Seeing the things around us ushers in an encounter with images and subsequently ourselves since we are implicated in their existence by seeing them. However, there is a mute “if” hiding in the infinitives of “see” and “know.” I read the conditional behind the imperative: if we can see them then we can know ourselves. But there is no actual seeing or knowing going on in the poem, not at this stage. On the other hand, the elusiveness of these sought after participle states does not preclude my pursuit of them. I treat the lines as an invitation.

Oppen’s work sustains my deep belief in poetry’s ability to demonstrate the possibility and failure of language’s communicative power. As his book moves through its serial structure we find speakers who are attempting, with conversation and observation, to understand the world around them. Much to the dismay of hope, progress is undercut. Much to the testament of hope, it continues. Its sincerity lies in its perpetuation. “But I will listen to a man, I will listen to a man, and when I speak I will speak, tho he will fail but I will listen to him speak. The shuffling of a crowd is nothing—well, nothing but the many that we are, but nothing.”

Oppen’s poems, in "Of Being Numerous" and throughout his collected works, are political without being overtly so. This confirms the intellectual divisions that Oppen found between political action and artistic endeavor. He wrote in his Daybooks that the difference between the two is the difficulty “to prove that political action was useful,” and the difficulty to “prove that art will be” (89). I hope that the poems I write share a similar indecisiveness and necessity about their place within a political context.

The political, rightfully, weighs on the poem. Perhaps an effective activism is lost to the poetic process, but one still acts and writes with the vast implications of being a subject in the political sphere. Such a position absorbs all different modes of reception and in
Gizzi’s work it arrives as it is received— as disjunction and irony. Michael Gizzi’s *New Depths of Deadpan* is such an engagement. Where Oppen continually goes outside, back to people and dialogue, Gizzi’s poems represent an aggregate of linguistic possibility cultural information. An interior accumulation. The references, when they happen, are not winking at the reader. They are engaged in what I understand as “perpendicularity.”

The perpendicular moment is when different words or meanings, momentarily, cross. At the most basic level this is the pun, and the difference between a “good” and “bad” pun is that the former posits an alternative meaning that might actually be contextually viable. Not merely word play, it is a possibility of another plane. It is perpendicular to the word or experience; a sudden intersection on a road where were it not for traffic lights there would be a pile up. Each meaning has a right of way, but the poem moves on shortly after stopping. I first began considering this possibility after seeing Alex Katz’s painting, “Donald and Roy.”

The subjects above, Donald and Roy, are neither looking at each other nor the viewer. But there is a point where their vision will cross before continuing on. Only the corner of the building appears to face us, specifically at the point where its different sides join. Where the subjects’ line of sight cross and the building joins is the perpendicular point. But where can that point be found in language? Does it even exist?

In his poem “Arbor Day,” Michael Gizzi writes:

An armory with no army  
which every summer leaves obscure.
Call it a respite. Say a train wreck dreamed it,
a purchase in the blur.
Was there a split in the arborist?
A shame we ignore the same words.
Sap becomes shellac.
A hand goes up, flanked by magicians.
A tale told to pigeons.

There are a couple instances of the perpendicular here. Armory calls to mind an army, the relationship is almost annagramatical and both words share some etymology. But less than a search for shared roots, the relationship feels organic. That is, the presence of one written word (armory) invokes the other, crosses it, and the poem takes off as an improvisation from this point. “Sap” and “shellac” have a similar relationship. I don’t have the space here to go into a close reading but I would like to point out how this is an extension of the sincere engagement and the uncertainty of a poem’s direction that I mentioned earlier. If one follows the worlds that words and events invoke, like the hand going up in the eighth line that invokes magicians in a martial position, then the poem stays true to its trajectory. Uncharted but not without purpose, its avowal remains (with another geometric term) congruent.

I hope readers find perpendicular moments in my poems as well. In “After Your Errands I Am Home” the relationship of “terrorist” and “tree” is, like armory and army, a suggested and inevitable path of language. Sincerity and irony are not so different. The arrival of a sincere ironic moment, however, is rare and by staving off more impulsive puns, jokes, and ironic phrasing perhaps the instances that make their way into the poem can be read as an integral part of the engagement.
On Assembling The Manuscript

I knew a linguistics student who took a class where a speaker of an obscure foreign language would meet with students every week and speak to them as they tried to decipher the attendant grammatical rules and systems. Out of disorder they would key in on repetition and structure. Even if they could not speak the language they understood its inner workings, how the words fit. I learned about listening from a class I never took. To listen: to listen to extrapolate; to listen as to determine; to listen as to nestle din into meaning.

In the Prepositional State has taken, judging from the oldest and most recent poems in the collection, a year and a half to write and two and a half months to assemble. The latter task has been most difficult for its unique challenge of attempting to move beyond simply containing the poems as any repurposed cereal box might, towards a curatorial reframing. Maybe when writing a collection of poems one does not so much write the book as listen to the poems take their place in it. And perhaps what Barbara Herrnstein Smith says of the function of a poem’s ending is true of the book’s function too: “we should be able to re-experience the entire work, not now as a succession of events, but as an integral design.”
Annotated Bibliography

I have been influenced by everything I’ve read. This makes an annotated bibliography a daunting task. Deciding on which books to include, I was guided by those poets who I continued to think about as I was writing In The Prepositional State and who in a short list can suggest others in their coterie that likewise inform my work.


   Armantrout’s *Veil* was among the first books I bought when I arrived at CU-Boulder. I wasn’t exactly sure how to read her poems when I first sat down with them but the structural qualities of many of the poems appealed to me. The separations between short, terse stanzas felt like translucent paper walls through which each stanza contributed its light. In “Native”: “How many constants *should* there be?/The slick wall of teeth? […] “Get to the point!”/as if before dark—/as if to some bench near a four way stop.” Multiple voices are present in Armantrout’s work, and whether they emanate from TV commercials or friends they are treated as equal receptions in the poem. The dry wit and serial sequences of Armantrout’s work is similar to that of Lyn Hejinian, Michael Palmer and other Language poets who have influenced me.


   Berrigan’s poems are moving for their generosity and humor. Such a generosity of spirit is common with his New York School predecessors, perhaps fitting between Frank O’Hara and Kenneth Koch. He continues the formal experimentation of Ashbery but also has the levity I notice in his contemporary, Bernadette Mayer. The presence of levity in his work does not undermine the seriousness of it. The accessibility and pleasure derived from reading his work for the first time moved me to incorporate it into my own. Subsequently, much of my writing from 2010 was derivative 2nd Gen New York School. I hope I’ve moved away from that phase, though his work remains
important to me. Also, Berrigan sent me on my way to Alice Notley, who I consider to be a “better” poet, but Berrigan was the gateway.


Celan’s work has a direct line into the duality of despair and hope in language. His later poems are heartbreaking representations of guilt, suffering, and survival. They are among the most moving poems I’ve read. And completely destructive. They are tapped into a linguistic energy that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy or best friend.


The colors. The objects. The art. In an essay in *Forces of Imagination*, “Poetry the True Fiction,” Barbara Guest wrote “vision and plasticity are the two essentials of the poem. The spirit of the poem and its moveable form, not just its “adjustable” form. Then we get into posing or Chevaliers or red blouses.” The presence of Chevaliers and red blouses and the posing we associate with portraiture seems to fills Guest’s work. Despite her connection to The New York School and the ekphrastic force of her poems, she is frequently left out of that poetically energized mid-century New York. I have not separated her from my entry on Berrigan and the older New York school to reinforce such a history, but to indicate that her perpetual experimentation and reinvention with endless themes and forms sets her apart from that coterie. She is, I think, more visionary and more daring.

*The Blue Stairs* (1968) and *Moscow Mansions* (1973) locate a synesthetic quality in the poem that projects outwardly into the world they describe. One encounters the world differently after reading Guest’s poems.

Effacing the mud
wracking myself with blue
coughs

And rising to walk
in my blue veils
over the Bosphorus
(“Turkey Villas”)
I frequently think of Cubist and Abstract Expressionist painting when reading Guest’s work. I also read the influence of the Symbolists in the synesthesia. There are atmospheric and geographic shifts in Guest’s poems, and her treatment of the page breaks opens possibilities and permissions. Guest’s engagement with visual art has influenced my own. Even if the direct impact of her work isn’t visible in my poems, I know I would be a worse poet without her.


Spicer joins Guest and Oppen as prominent influences on my sense of poetry and poetics. In Spicer I find an ultimate commitment to the reception of the poem. To be fair, he considered this reception a dictation from Martians and I give it less extra-terrestrial power, though I agree about its uncertain origins. After Lorca (1957) and Admonitions (1957) remain touchstones in my reading. Spicer’s poetics communicate in a correspondence with Lorca that invokes lemons and seagulls. The seagull, that coastal creature who I like to think connects my Sheepshead Bay with Spicer’s San Francisco becomes the embodiment of the poem. In “A Diamond,” “the poem is a seagull resting on a pier at the end of the ocean.” Spicer’s appeal to Lorca for the lemon to be a real lemon is an appeal for the role of objects in poems. They must be integral, and they must replace their real life counterpart. Lemons in poems should seem so true that tangible lemons seem like ersatz lemons.

Spicer’s vision of the poem is perhaps rightfully idealized. He was known for his strict judgment of poems, finding in them the presence of dictation (the highest honor) or the half-poem/half-dictation (not bad but not great), and the lowliest— “poem” itself. Such a work was overworked with too much of the poet’s consciousness in it. The process of getting out of my head is something I still struggle to accomplish, and I fear if Spicer were alive and read my poems he would call them just that.
Preposition definition: A preposition is a part of speech that shows the relation of a noun or pronoun to another word. What is a Preposition? What are prepositions? Prepositions show the relationship of a noun or pronoun to another word. These relationships include where, when, who, or what. Examples of Prepositions. A prepositional phrase may also include any modifiers in the phrase. Prepositional phrases clarify the relationship of the preposition to other words. Prepositional Phrase Examples: along the path. along (prep.) + the (article) + path (noun) = prepositional phrase. amid torment. amid (prep.) + torment (noun) = prepositional phrase. throughout (the colorful garden). In the same prepositional context, it is used on one occasion verbally and on another occasion nominally. English requires the use of prepositional phrases and reflexive and other pronouns to communicate what the middle morpheme could alone. Such adverbs are sometimes called prepositional adverbs, sometimes adverbial particles. Other parts of speech, in a state of inflection, may be used with a prepositional sense. A phrase consisting of a preposition and its object, with or without other words, is called a prepositional phrase. This use is due to the fact that the infinitive with to is really a prepositional phrase. In these sentences, the indirect object me, being equivalent to a prepositional phrase, is an adverbial modifier. A prepositional phrase begins with a preposition and ends in a noun. That noun is called the object of the preposition. Many Preposition words can also be adverbs which describe verbs (actions and being) or conjunctions. Example: She walked down the hill. â€“ the preposition down. He put the book down. â€“ the adverb down. She took a nap after lunch. â€“ the preposition after. She went outside after she put the book down. â€“ the conjunction after. Many prepositions can indicate more than one meaning or relationship. Preposition for agent is used for a thing which is cause of another thing in the sentence. Such prepositions are by, with etc. Examples