Right Between Empty

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by

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Acknowledgements

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An Introduction of *Right Between Empty*

In the spring of 2015, I found myself unable to cope with my identity. I was a twenty-four-year-old college student with quadriplegia, two deceased parents, and absolutely no answers. I had tried ignoring my deep anguish, but questions I pushed to the bottom floated to the surface. One particular day in April, all of my questions filled my head with a noise impossible to ignore—I snapped. Eyes pouring, I raced my powerchair up the alley and into the woods. There I sat unnoticed and secluded. I closed my eyes hard, I focused on the buzz and chirps of the woods. I began focusing on my breath to control my sobbing, and eventually, I began only focusing on my breathing. The floating questions pushing on my skull released and found their way past the clouds, and in poured nothingness. I snapped out of the state of nothingness and headed home. Up until that point in time, I had been sitting in a wheelchair for five years, but on that day I had sat zazen for the first time.

**Thesis from Beginning to End**

The spring of my breakdown I began dabbling into meditational literature and Zen Buddhist philosophy. I decided to pursue a creative honors thesis that reflected my experiences past and present, my “beginners mind” with zazen, and my disability. Having had Professor Paulenich for several poetry workshops and remembering his Buddhist affiliation, I decided to seek his guidance. We decided to begin work on the manuscript that summer. Summer (2015) was about reading poetry by poets influenced by Zen
Buddhism along with actual Buddhist literature. I submitted rough drafts of poems too, but emphasis was placed on the understanding of Buddhism. By garnering a greater respect for Zen, I began approaching my poetry writing differently in the Fall. The fall semester (2015) was about writing and appreciation of craft. Professor Paulenich and I met to discuss revision and look at new poems I had written. The process continued this way with some days more focused on craft, some days more focused on examining other poets. Spring (2015) was more of a macro approach. We looked at theme as well as the ordering of poems. The most current work involves looking at critiques sent by members of my honors thesis committee and revising where necessary.

On Craft and Style

A reader of Right Between Empty, after reading poems like “Brainwashed” and “Crippled,” will likely notice the employment of caesuras. The most intriguing reason for caesuras is the aesthetic value of the spacing—even before reading, “Brainwashed” is pleasing to look at. More than aesthetics, caesuras found in my poems force a certain rhythm upon the reader. Speaking abstractly, caesuras in “Brainwashed” can represent breathing in mediation or the void found through zazen. In “Crippled” spacing is more representative of disconnected body. The voice is highly disabled—the usage of uniform stanzas did not seem appropriate.

Jane Hirshfield inspired me to write some poems based in grounded things, objects, and settings, then lend insight to highlight philosophical connotations. For
example, in “Groundhog” I present a scenario laid out in things, objects, and setting then present Buddhist-leaning insight with the ending: “Where it traveled, I examined/ a pressed path I never saw.” This line is not, as Yusef Komunyakaa says, tying a bow on the end, it is presenting meditational practice in things. In fact, my main goal is to elicit grander ideas in ordinary things/experiences.

When looking at line length, enjambment, and diction, I look to “The Hawk,” “Syrian Seashell,” “No Time but in Distance,” and “Dream like Time.” The poem “The Hawk” is best served by the shortest lines, overall, in the entire collection. The situation described in the poem is one that lasts seconds. The short lines give the reader the impression of a hawk’s rapid movement downward. The conservation of words helps the poem end as quickly as the hawk made its kill. In “Syrian Seashell” short lines were chosen to rapidly progress into the absurd and surreal. Inside of this surreal setting, diction was carefully selected to reflect the Syrian refugee crisis, and a widespread apathy shown towards suffering refugees because of “foreignness.” In “Dream like Time” diction was chosen to reflect the limits of language, while simultaneously attempting to evoke questions of reality, itself. Words put in abnormal, syntactical order are supposed to be seen as nonsensical but also meaningful in a forced-down-the-throat way. “No Time but in Distance” presents diction that makes one reexamine their idea of time, by measuring time units with distance measurements. Line shortness and enjambment helped pace the poem, speeding it up and slowing it down where necessary.
The Thoughts that Drive the Me

This collection of poetry firstly reflects the idea of self-discovery and losing one’s self. Meditation, for me, pulls me into a oneness; writing poetry reminds me I am but an aggregate of a whole—yet, still interconnected. The ego is what blurs the line. In the time I have spent writing this collection, I see that after meditation I am more in the “now.” Being in the now has helped me observe and write the world around me, more effectively. Sitting zazen is not a moment for writing poetry, and writing poetry by definition cannot be sitting zazen. However, I am convinced, poetry can do the best job of explaining the unexplainable. Part of the never fully encompassed by language is internal thought. Even in just writing the last sentence, I am not fully conveying what I wanted to say. Poetry takes written and spoken language and provides it with additional tools. With these additional tools, I have attempted to reach towards ideas and themes the best I could.

Meditation is something private, whereas poetry, in Gary Snyder’s words, “is [something] out in the world” (2). Snyder points out that meditation and poetry are among two of the oldest human customs. Ralph Waldo Emerson reflects Snyder’s sentiment: “Language is fossil poetry. […] [Language] is made up of images and tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin” (627). I find encouragement and vivacity in both Snyder and Emerson’s words, here. To be the first to utter the idea of fire with a noise, to me, is no different than using several
words to translate disability onto paper. Internally the phenomenon is ablaze; externally, words, groups of words and craft need suffice.

From speaking “fire,” to contemporary poetry, the intention is what Hirshfield calls a hoped for outcome of expanded knowing (13). Snyder, discussing common threads of contemporary, American, Buddhist poetry, posits elements of poetic content: “They are unsentimental, not overly abstract, on the way toward selflessness, not particularly self-indulgent, whole-hearted, nonutopian, fluid, (that is, able to shift shapes), on the dry side, kindhearted, unembarrassed, free of spiritual rhetoric and pretense of magic, and deeply concerned with the question of knowing” (8). By looking at elements of content, one can surmise elements of Zen Buddhist practice. Though positioning my own work in a certain canon is egoistic, perhaps presumptuous, I sincerely hope my poetry affects one person’s idea of knowing, and reflects all I have learned through Buddhist poets, teachers, and sitting zazen.
Brainwashed

It
Is because I sit I know this brainwash this
Pejorative need not be a drain-plug need be
But a step a sensation a whispered-air for

It
Becomes a river-stone when you feel the shower when
The stream becomes a stillness becomes
A bath the deepest pool for

It
Delves in two & soaks its cloth & realizes
It’s not the cloth but the cleaning. The cloth
Needn’t be separate to be.

It
Finds itself translucent like layered carbon
Called a diamond. The precious sparkle comes about
Through time & pressure through sitting.
Apple Butter Hooves

I

Yard full of crab apples fallen brown and all ready for war. Pick up a stick a sapling (with some bend some play) and sharpen it to stab reddened spheres.

Lob skywards to bruise other flingers.

The tar and chipped roads like Quay are toyed with by toddlers. One crab by one placed side by side touching-one-another. We’re in delight after dinner ‘cause cars have crushed and sweetened the road.
Repeat the line and hope

that by summer’s end the street may be a river of apple sauce. We feel tall we picked our food off worn branches dangle just like monkeys.

II

Later years in the grove the apple trees are surrounded by Multiflora Rose and are unclimbed upon. I sit there now

and wait for deer to linger out. Sun sets and Yellow Jackets leave the softened grounded fruit. The tree line turns an evening blue. White tails bounce with memory of the hidden orchard.
There is no kill this night but I leave after conversation with the little boy who once dangled there.
Game of Chess

I find the graves for a game of chess with my old man. Dad cheats. I get wholly distracted by the ghoul of hellbender flesh & my dad switches knight with pond. I expect honesty from a dead man—after all, riddled with cancer we listened to his death wish: at harvest moon a chess game & a soft pack of Reds.

Tombstones like shark fins swim closer. Henry Wordsworthwhile (deceased 1885), is in the crowd watching the game of generations.
Green Castle

On the bank of the farm lake fishin’
Channel cats with chicken nuggets.
No bites, no tugs, no bumps,
Just the Three-Fourth moon’s reflection

Stirring in the surface-feeder ripples.
Across the way, over the dirt trail
A row of corn, punctuated by
Three proud Pin Oaks, stands.

Time leaves evening towards its night,
We got skunked this one. Stalwart silhouette:
Corn a stout wall, Pin Oaks
The castle’s towers—farm, a shadow fortress.
How Words Do

Bizarre how my brother reacted—me having been paralyzed from the chest down—when I said I started sitting.

“You’re in a wheelchair you’re always sitting.”

“No, no, no,
I’ve been sitting zazen.”

Bizarre how I replied when my brother asked if I’d walk down to the store—me having been disabled six years counting.

“I’ll go,
but I can’t walk.”

“Ha, ha, ha,
you know what I mean.”
Groundhog

Stuck outside again. It comes with the body—
I won’t get winded sayin it—just,
I sit wheelchair’d & have
morning hands with
a door problem. Regardless,

I’m out here & it’s cooking hot. Thanks to
an old maple by the dry-rot fence for company
& shade to read under.
I could easily call for help,
but don’t—phone’s in the house.

There is a fear-drop at the bottom
of this deep pool of excitement.
I picture one wheel in deep sand,
a coyote picking up on my struggle.
Was this accident? Trap?

Deep in the flow of the words & the passing-by
of another car, another book, a rustle
itches my eye’s corner—turn my neck owl-like,
like neighbors we lock kind eyes
through the fence hole—

Hello there fella
I think, holding a laugh in my chest.
Stare down ensues—not of cowboys—but of
long lost friends across the hall.
I fear for the thing,

it’s my neighbor &
the bottom of the food chain. It starts
to waddle right towards me, the chair has become
sufficiently natural for the groundhog. How this feels,
two-feet away, and he’s just here—shortly, plump. Little guy

Seems to have the neighborhood mapped: Crawls
for the maple, scoots down the steep
side of the gravel drive, pauses, all clear,
darts to the building side, hugs the wall
towards the abandoned ranch-style, &

like receiving cover fire sprints the open lot & disappears
between shaking weeds. I hope he’ll come back,
maybe he’s a she: Why do I assume?
Where it traveled, I examine a pressed path I never saw.
Nikki

I knew her through high school—
she got me weed at the park &
Skoal from Gorbys Gas. Four years

her & Matt were high
school sweethearts.

Legs like dreaming out a window,
eyes like razor—
emerald & precious,
smile everything right about summer,
lips a cool June swim,
breasts a foreign palace.

Eight-years since then & the paper says
she’s dead—
the motorcycle
lost the road…

She’s not here to smile me through it,
not there to steal a smoke from,
to weigh the anger on. I cry
out of selfishness.
No Time but in Distance

I’m here for hours, but hours are feet, miles,
two rotations around a circle. The clock says poems have a life
of three meters, half a centimeter—depends on the hand.

Time & time again, distance: Circles move in circles. Fathoms,
handbreadths, reeds, cubits, spans, a Days Journey, revolve
around other orbits. Space: moved, through,
dead end, in, on, here. There is not was, but is ten inches, one
million furlongs since. Things move, in & out, here & here & here,
then three stadia from. How little the measure until nothing happens?
She’s

a strong presence,
  a cup of black coffee.
She’s made up her mind
  ‘bout everything
before it’s said.
She’s a whole-hearted
  lover. Cares for one
lame man’s wellbeing.
She’s good news on a
  solemn day, sun
light bouncing off
  a dead lake.
Snag

Between Sycamore rock and water
left by ice age recession sits
my fishing pole
with line out far
in rested oxbow lake
broke from the nearby river
back when. Ten-thousand years
defiant the behemoth stone still sits
breaking progress of current. In near river rapids
falls the bank
toward the megalith
covered on its north by moss.

Think Reel my line and
find it snagged in bottom things.
There beneath the pool of green
a deepness has the lure
in hands that hold the water’s weight.
A matter of energy: How long
to tug until stones grow tired of
pinching rubber worms.

How long until one knows whether
rocks have shifted or
feel the need to keep the bait?
Nothing but the struggle
of loss in bodies of water. The drops are puddles
are ponds are lakes are sweat. The hook
cought on a log caught in the mud caught to the earth
cought to all things pulling.

The lake here drops of which
fell on wrists at Little League
when seven and
looking to the heavens for downpour and a canceled game:

Owns the drip that held by cells a synapse is realized
to hold a memory
of cool clear water drank
in high school hallway fountains.
Cut my line under the boulder’s toe.
Here sits a pool of recycled bodies
each molecule a storied past
of being moved and pooled.
Snuff

A rite of passage they'd say the guys
my friends threw me that tuna can
 titled Copenhagen.

_ Puts fuzz on your nuts  hair on your nuggets  fur on your peaches_

Everything does thus far has it’s certified:

Deer blood  tripe  ‘shine  squirrel meat  raw silver darters.

Pack the can  pop the lid
pinch the chaw  pack the cheek  press the chew
sharp scent of earthy-rich-vinegar-long-cut-tarred grounds.

Tobacco  tobacco  tobacco in fingers like a minnow
 squeezed in a Kingfisher’s beak.

Matt works a dredge on the ‘Oio River Justin goes to school with me.

Senior year is a rite a right to skip fourth block faithfully.
_Athletic Conditioning_ a class invented by coaches in football counties. Fuck those simple ass slappers!

Chevy Metro three-banger five-speed out the lot
pass daddy’s cars screamin’ _shift me_ at forty
in third gear e-brake on cinder crusted back road corners.

We own these roads.

_Gentlemen_ Matt colored river mud speaks with an air of aristocracy

_A chaw this fine eev-nin?_

Shift over he meets us at the park.
We gather like the Framers justly assembled against institutions.

_Don’t mind if ahdoo_ Other days it’s

_Care for a chaw-fish?  A chaw-daddy?  A fat lip?_

Either way the first time you rub you rub sick.
Swirls the Waves

I

Forget all that we’re fishing well
I’m fishing you’re reading. What
do I know? You could very well
be on a boat fishing & reading

While this is with you.
For sure you’re reading &
catching my words.

II

Forth & back back & forth in the flow
of four inch waves over gravel boulders

in the swirl of the deceased
a pummeled Bluegill with milk dots

for eyes churns. People weekend campers
new to setting let these top-feeders

eat the hook & cut the line: Everything in its place.
The catfish will find the dead the stench the decomposed

& think nothing but time to eat:
Time to be.
Syrian Seashell
*For Aylan Kurdi*

Boy & dad hand in hand
walk the Turkish coast
for shells.  “Look dad!

A boy!  Face down.”
A real find
among the broken & chipped.

“It’s a pretty one dad.”

Still both shoes on
its little blue jean shorts
its red translucent shirt
       bunched to its armpits
a full head of hair.

An intrusive
syrian species.

“Turn it over     how’s its eyes?”

Clouded over
staring forward.

“Can we take it home?”

“A shell is a shell son
but some shells shine
some turn into sand.”

“But this one’s pretty.”

“This variety isn’t valuable.”
The Hawk

From roadside pole, razor’s edge,
reach eyes on life sustaining life to prey.

Stance stoic— rabbit’s heartbeat—
Red-tail moves from icy sculpture to flux:
Pours from perch, to air, to end of life (one last Breath). Blood, paste in dusty hay while open eyes look for trickster coyotes.

Talons pull on softness: Strands of flesh, sinew, then broken bone to mouth.
The field is hiding.
Buried Treasure

The travelers pass
A farm field full of green leaves

Sweet beats underground.
To a Poet Human or Otherwise

(“To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence”
James Elroy Flecker)

I am dead, and you’re alive—
my fear being, Flecker’s torch
passed to me this brisk autumn day
has run cold, and these words

sit as stones in dark soil where
no mason can make meaning,
where the absolute truth
about the expanse and strings

of space-time are known and
poetry needn’t be, for beauty
is a solved equation and arcane
are those that dissented.

Sole reader or those that translate
these fossil symbols: this
part of me and Flecker has reached
you that are and those who will.

Are you alive, living? My hope is yes,
that nothing is knowable. That this
might touch and breath and never
be fully understood.
How Air Is

Warm, how the summer comes, & burnt meats migrate down alleyways.

How one drives through country stretches, windows down—manure is spread.

How Rosa speaks about these days: The peach moon sits atop the town,

& lures the heart to sink along with it. Think about one’s hometown,

how far away from here, how close that feels.
Crippled

*Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
All of them touch him like some queer disease.*

~Wilfred Owen “Disabled”

Have you ever had to convince yourself
you are in fact still you     still you     still
the thoughts that drive the you?

Nonsense.     You are in a bed     a bed
two to a room     twelve rooms
to a hall     and two halls in     a “home.”

You lie in bed for days     deny
the nurse’s directives. Your world
is opiate metamorphosis.

You think about everything you’ve
ever known to be true     to be
a motherfucking farce.     You

apologize to whatever     for the language.
Are you really?     You surrender
to a higher power?
You’re high

right now.     Get up     face the god
that sits beside your hospital bed.     The wheeled
ordered beast of burden rests     unseated     unmoved
ready to direct your new path.     You’ll
have several seated gods     fractioned five years apart
through Medicaid.

***

Two months you’re in bed     lying about
who you’ve become
how you’ve been made incomplete.     Then a life
from ages ago
sits on your bedside     with high-school-blond hair.

You already know from her eyes.     She’s crying
when she’s finished her scripted diatribe.
A tale about going off into the world     to her college
and this means leaving some(s)ting(s) behind.
You shift weight
and bemoan her pity her world as you stare at her
dangling crucifix.

Her eyes pour as your life with her becomes the past
for you’ve grown roots in the nursing home.
You’ll need medicated bathed treated
put into the beast of burden.

You know this is high school bliss shit she
has a loving god she has to follow you
have a god unmanned ready to lead you. You
say you’re “fine” because anything else
would be a lie as well. You learn “fine”
will stop the other words stop her reasons “why.”

***

You’re in everyone’s thoughts everyone’s prayers except
your own. No one
understands but you the modernist tenet that
language never fully spreads the blanket
over
reality’s toes and
carries countless patches. You throw symbols
in the pot hope
something tastes real that ideas heal
the crippled you the thoughts that drive
the you knowing either way
something bitter or sour
might nourish.
Hold My Eyes

While I think about today     tomorrow and
your sweet palm
bit by mosquitoes on the lake
driving home     my face red

in the side-mirror scratches and
reaches for the portrait in that picture that
turns eyes green     with a streetlight change.

It takes miles
    never gets ground     but takes
and on a single lane

captured in mind & headlights.
Calm river:     The unfold
of highway that pulls you
into drowsy midnight intersection towns.

Times through and
there’s still new bricks in buildings.     Thoughts
like sea-sunk scrolls     plentiful and
lost on ocean floors.     Time & travel

have their way
of talking nonsense.
Storage Unit

Papers rough & hardened
Drafts in boxes beside the
Pots & pans

Of my family’s storage unit. The unit
Testament to generation permutation.
Piled bones owned once by flesh. Mom dies
Dad dies the storage unit becomes another sibling.

Parents, grandparents leave their jeans stacked.
The conflation of DNA & stuff.
Dream Like Time

[Part X]
The particles
that make my body have been always? Is it
when Its together forms consciousness
& be
my me

that things start to? Is it the highest honor
for carbon to be part of my (its) aware? How can carbon
realize me, thing, self, person, my.
Carbon—here a person—here
not a diamond.

Happenstance. Just is,
time infinite
unmeasured because measuring
isn’t—no I around to measure the that. Only mind
the now

because a now is all the mind has to mind, now. Elements—
ever life—have no time
to scale
forces working in the random
happening to arrange a thing

that writes a sentence pontificating life meaning?
No:
A word that best describes a circumstance in which
answers are. The the is just an is
to better understand the the.
see [Part X] for clarification.
Out in a Town, a Brent & a Joe

There are towns where young men
sit on roofs like vagrants
overlooking hallowed highways, burning
stinky marijuana.
A Brent says—looking at a Joe
who

on edge pisses into midnight vacuum—
"John nabbed some Natty from his old man?!"
with no reply.
Nothing the world has these guys want,
they have no patience

For idealists. The highway is nothing
but an attempt to take man somewhere else.
When a Brent & a Joe take to a road, going to go,
to go to go to go,
they are aimless prophets.
Trails are boundless

where young men drive—giving up
destination in grand fashion—only getting to a point
where departure is the next aim.
A Brent and a Joe know
they share

a nowness about life,
that no one cares about—a reality yet unrealized
that they won’t care one day, too. But the cigarettes
are smooth & hard to come by, & the night
is young & awake.
Bibliography


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