ABSTRACT

JACK PINE SCAGGLY

by John T. McCormick II

This manuscript is a collection of poetry written over the past two years. It is in three sections, which, respectively, concentrate on relationship poems ranging from home to the romantic; conceptual poems which are more experimental and driven by ideas and notions of language; and the final section which is very naturalistic and reflects on interactions with place. Throughout the sections, the poems are concerned with maintaining a humble and self-aware speaker who is able to use images that are unexpected, creating a space for the reader to have a quick emotional response while remaining evasive on an intellectual level.
Jack Pine Scraggly

A Thesis

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Sharing Air
Lir

He stands still
crying that his children
have flown off, into legend.

At the lake’s edge, he weeps,
kneels in the reeds
and the soft silt, pausing
to gaze at the other shore —

how it silhouettes four swans,
how it could have been worse
but not more horrible.
Gift

My father gave me a feather
wrapped in a red bandana
that read Ni-Mi-Win:
a remnant of a pow-wow in Duluth
the summer I learned toe-toe-heel
to the water-drum beat of the earth,
to admire the fancy dancer dervish.

Now the feather and bandana lie
on my dresser, with pictures of friends
and unmatched socks.
My Dad Saw a Garden

All I saw was clay,
mud and shit from a large dog
left the past winter.
Dad wanted to reproduce
our old home with Miracle-Grow,

and leaned on his spade
before rows of peas
carrots
zucchini
lemon basil
as I went to the park in search
of new friends, trying to pick
up my ten year-old life.

And the sweet peas
those summer evenings
were as fresh as me chasing
the dog on my bike, and Spike
stopping and chasing me.
Arches Park

For Daisy

Hiking, we were stuck
on a formation in Utah.
A storm charged us
from the horizon, fiercer
than we dreamed it could.

That my father could fall
as we huddled under a juniper
frightened me more than
any night he comforted
me through.
   Dad, your gaze
was so strong it
tethered us to rock.
**Rag Doll**

My knees and elbows always pink and bloody. I was a clumsy kid — distracted, awkward. My dad told me to “Fall like a rag doll, just go limp until you hit the ground, and then you won’t break anything.” I learned to crumple and spring back up. Trip, rag doll, run. After soccer, I would tell him how right he had been, nothing broken, if still pink and bloody.

In college, dad would pick me up and we’d talk the four hours back to home about religion, history, affirmative action, his unpublished novels, how I was going to change the world, and how Angie was organizing his walls of books and stacks of papers. He had a story that related to any topic I brought up.

Sometimes it was embarrassing to see him engaging with everyone he met — flirtatious, intelligent and never letting a stupid pun escape a conversation. I listened, and gained as much as I could from his worldliness, trying to see if I couldn’t beat one of his jokes with one of my own.

Dad, Mom wrote to say that you’re leaving her this spring. For all the talking you do, you never mentioned this. You act on so few of your plans, why would you move without a word? What stories do you have to tell me from your college days that relate to this? Why are my reactions now so clichéd and trite: after-school-spicaled? Where’s your Irish wit now?

You’re inventing a face for yourself, sleeping on the couch, tending carefully to private distractions.

“When you fall, go limp. You won’t break. It’ll be less painful.”
Cindy

I watched her with a guilty pleasure
I hadn’t felt since a smile
wrapped around my face as I saw
oil rainbows slide down puddles
in a parking lot toward what must now be
a polluted creek. She was awash
beneath the yellow fixtures
of our kitchen that gave a look
of instant memory to our winter
family gatherings. The lights made Heather,
my skinny sister, look sometimes healthy,
sometimes jaundiced. Cindy was her friend,
with a hyper laugh, short blonde hair
and blue eyes ringed thick
with mascara I would say was too much
for any of my sisters although it looked just
right on Cindy.
Vrikshasana

Yoga darling, are you posing?
        — or does it all come naturally?

Your fingers — full of lanky power —
pick out a tune with a pencil
on paper absorbing
sweat and window’s light.

Sweet elm, waking early
from February: gather young
ivy in from the wind.
Glimpses and Versions

So round you’re puggish,  
always turning and spinning  
and underfoot. I can dust you  
off and carry you,  
but I doubt you’ll be useful.

You were forgotten, and dark inside.  
The sun was bright here on the prairie,  
and I could feel your memories  
radiating across the plains grass,  
sweet grass and sage.

Oh, sly and wry! It’s good  
to see you, I didn’t mean  
to embarrass you. We always  
seem to meet this way, a glance  
and then retreat to shadows.

You fit perfectly between my  
hand, wonderful for bringing  
to my lips. So humble  
and practical, yet delicate,  
and I don’t trust myself.

You are so far across the valley,  
surrounded by evergreens —  
it really brings out your blue. I hear  
you close as well: clear  
cold and descending through pebbles.
Tryst

Wonderful, you keep me turning in your throw,

hoping to find an error in you for my own survival.

How tenuous we are, balanced on your wrist.

Force me into that skyward gaze of awe.

Don’t love me as your scrambling lizard —

put me out or let me run.
Scene of an Accident

We’ll bump into each other
with an apology already in mind,
making it a collision,
which will create drama
that will turn the sidewalk
into molasses for a five foot radius.

Stuck and stammering through our lines,
we will trudge past each other. Beyond
that circle, we will turn and finish with
more ease. I’ll resolve to make
cue cards of my hands.
Reconciliation

The arch of her back in her voice,
voicing “Please” with a fear
I may say “Yes.”

The passed rain —
a plastic tent,
rich with oxygen
and shimmering like a crow’s back.

Are we so important
here sharing air?
Can we gaze down our throats
and follow the other in?
Hail, The Cold, My Love

You were not prepared for that shock but still moved in low flurries and cubed yourself to the effect. Blockish among sharp shadows and the glare of the sun blizzard.

The blood fled from your lips, leaving them a silver-dusted blue, with your eyes tearing against the wind.

You told of a chatter — breath turned ice and lungs freezing and rattling against ribcage.

I want you to feel the pain and delirious relief of melting from sculpture, but I can’t pull you to any warmth without risking fissure and shatter.

We are a zero idea hiding an imagined negative that could cover hoary hearts.

It could pierce.
Los Dos

He arrived in Mexico
too gringazo.
From Jack Pine scraggly
he was a blue-eyed Cortés
without Malinche as consort,
though hopeful he would find her
and rewrite the role of Conqueror:
settling without stealing —
just a slow fade back.

Bilingual but never la Chingada,
she guided him at her own pace.
Sleepy cat without sunbeam,
ever home with coffee scent.
She is a slinky goddess sprung
from a Scot and Maya. She brought him
in with a tenderness and will
continue to guide him from a distance.
Within

It was in her iris:
a sparkle and then flat

like a wink without motion——
a wink that I couldn’t tell if I was

in on a joke or the joke.
But I seemed privy to a lot more

information that I was entitled
to, like I was in her mind

but didn’t know the language and codes,
which makes me think I am part of her

dream, but still my own being——
know what I mean? *wink*

Sparkle
flat
Left Language
Lament

That which is with the lip craving,
Such as it is attached my word,
Finds right the company
The thing my left language
Which agitates with the funnel from abroad
Who is put at beyond completion
In the abundance of drop
Of my opening their speed thought
Of giving English decirte
Of item I in something.
Dream I Almost Had

She left her maids at the altar
to chase down some tequila
that was flying along a desert highway
with sky stripes of a purple horizon.
He was tending baby turtles
and hardly took notice.

All that was said was forgotten —
just her in her dress, leaping down
arid asphalt after alcohol,
Her veil a low cloud.
Groom was tending to turtles,
his fingertips wet and sandy,
pointing them out to sea.

And so it often goes—
maids left alone in churches,
but flying booze can’t be left alone;
it might hit someone on the head,
someone helping wildlife, or making documentaries
about mass transportation. And her veil looks
so like a cloud.

The maids begin to clamber
about like pinwheels, or the eyes
of psychotic parrots.
They hear a plucked guitar, are torn
between duty to the wayward cloud
and Romance waiting —
breathing like a pronghorn
through nose and mouth all at once.

It is a sight to see:
her veil the bottle the sunset
the little flipper legs still moving towards the sea.
Scattered across so many landscapes.

Broken free from the Church
(which is solid somehow, baked and dry
like the turtle that didn’t wake, or rather
burst from its shell and went back to sleep
in the burning sand), the bride still scampers.
The maids begin rending bouquets
and he pauses to wipe his brow —
turtle still in hand.
Clouds begin to gather, ready to ravage
the shore and then the desert.
He understands and he tends to them
with his fingertips, while they flap their fins
  they hear a guitar
  she runs down tequila

and the groomsmen
have yet to wake up.
Empty Pedestal

In this void, I can love you completely
And keep my record clean
As we carry out our affair so discreetly
With no one suspecting any thing.

Oh my nonexistent lover believe
Me, there is no other to compare
Against your beauty. For it will never leave —
There is no escaping nowhere.

I do objectify you here in this
Sonnet, though, at heart, I’m no misogynist.
So, my dear, please don’t be remiss —
You lack agency because you don’t exist.

Darling, come, here we know no fear.
Lie lightly beside me — whisper sweet nothings in my ear.
Stacking

“These days are for the birds,” but the birds don’t want them either—though cold days are old toast.

So we will stack these days on the dust of the fridge until penguins come begging.
Bang

I am just a meek prophet
so I would love to claim
that the world will end with a whisper…

but I feel that it will indeed
be with a bang or something else calamitous.
No secrets, just a flash of action,
a reward for the short attention spans
we’ve refined.

A finality we can share and discuss
and make hand motions and sound effects
to recreate for all the sound sleepers
the next morning.
Shells

The soul is a gastropod
inching
a way across
the bottom of life,
shimmering a path.

What shells does it leave
washed in silt? Their tight
spirals left empty.
Casualty

It’s just that you simplify justice. Simply a way of playing god — judging the world you live in, affecting it from a casualized distance, in which you are not judged. Just us, and we are reduced in your offhand manners, as if to say complexity is rude.
Self Documentary

I observe my Self in my natural environment, through a pair of good binoculars, although sometimes I get close enough that I can almost reach out and touch it: there’s really been some trust developed lately.

I started studying my Self a several years ago. Not many other people were studying my Self, and deep down, I knew that the only way for it to survive would be for more data to be gathered and shared.

If people know that my Self laughs with friends, frets for family at night and even traveled as far as Mexico, then, maybe, they would stop destroying its habitat.

Distance is important. This is the only way I can really see my Self acting naturally. As much as some nights I would like to take my Self in, I have to preserve professional distance.

As it is, my Self adapts too readily when it encounters others. This makes it susceptible to poaching: once it trusts another, it is highly vulnerable; for while the Self is solitary by nature, it has grown accustomed to larger social groups.
Arse Poetica

To make them flowery
disguises their more earthy functioning.
When we sit down with them, we
realize (especially through the sounds)
how human we really are. They provide
a cathartic release.

Really large ones are legendary and
attract a lot of attention, but smaller ones
are easier to remember and are appreciated
for their tightness. Regardless of size, it is
how they move us that remains important.
The good ones support you for a lifetime.
Short Intermissions

*Sound bites*
Plague our nation.

*I live*
behind a mask.
You can't miss it.

*There’s an exception*
to every rule,
except this one.

A Connection is Made
Have you ever had that feeling?
Yeah... me too.

The fragrance of Ox
We should get new candles

Antecedent
See me afterwards
Clinging

We are all conceived of an urgency —
wait nine months, then years:
a swarm of moths flit, hairy,
considering our fates and fears.

But my best friend hates moths,
so for him I wish something
more fitting — a Molotov
Cocktail, angry and spitting.

Then metaphor becomes currency
to purchase a measure of “meaning,"
barter away prophecies,
and all those bushes burning

tempt us to a desert, too far away,
where we trade words, to find what they say.
Events Withheld
for Geoffrey Squires

imperfection and that is splendid
it traps and stuns

inhale again maybe slide
a sigh into the room
to see if he will notice
no he has his own drama

drama that waits for plot
not air
Out among the bard-slayers, 
we down pints and watch gangster 
movies, wanting to gun down 
the voyeur and the phoenix 
and stamp out the fires of history 
repeating.

We may be caught 
by the blaze — our feet blistered, 
our calves seared to our asses, 
but we won’t be aloof.

Even so, I might tell you I’ll 
retreat and indulge — that icy alone.
Across the Darkness
Raven

Humor my obsession, burnt bird of Apollo,
Cúchulainn’s telling shadow,
Cherokee mountain maker,
Northwest coast trickster,
Let me stretch my folly — circle my thoughts
In imitation of something greater,
Like you on your thermal. Glinting
Guardian, call out, let me think you announce
Yourself to me, that you carry something of mine
In your presence.

I will wear you on my shoulder,
Seek out your black form in gray skies
So, despite your leering eye,
You will let me be self-important
In my attempts at humility.
cold mouse

a shadow darted
in the slush
i ran after
dove and gathered it
in my mittens
above the frozen lot
a shaking body
i put down
by a bush

the terror
in being saved
Bemidji Park

A seeded dandelion slips
into the west.
Blow on it —
make more stars fly
across the darkness.

Late enough to be early
the black stones
lie like toads,
cold and wet
in the slick grass.

Birds spread rumors
of the sun and the jack pines
silhouetted
frame the short beach.
A Night by the Hills

The hills are distant, black
under the night’s charcoal gray
and cocooning fog,
like smoldering ashes,
stretching across the valley.

I want silence here,
in the darkness,
but the leaves grow heavy
with mist and drops
fall onto the underbrush.

In the morning, the fog
has passed and the hills
are closer and blue.
The silence
I wanted was never outside.
Paths

I
In the winter, rabbits run the same paths
during the nights to stay warm. This creates
“rabbit highways” where snares are laid.

A rabbit freezes to death, afraid to move
with even the slightest pressure around its neck.

II
Paths are worn in this forest
where the redundant weight of life
wears life, leaves a mark:

  an
  active scar
  acting as a vein
or
  a lengthened synapse

III
Paths are inevitable. It’s not
which path you choose,
it’s how you react when you feel
the pull of the noose.
Galway Shore

I can’t tell you if the fog is hiding the horizon
or made a new one, full of mist and the Atlantic.

The wet wind and ivy are too distracting for me to tell anyone about
the fog against the landscape,

using guerilla tactics against our lines, the fog like
a polar bear — at least in terms of its disguises.

Ireland is shaped by fog — its hills, marshes, lakes and small waterfalls running over
the peat and ivy draping

familiar famine walls. It is the concentration on what can’t be seen behind
the fog that covers us here

with differing horizons.
Ohio Days

A cardinal claiming the pines in a family neighborhood. No longer needing the camaraderie of winter in melting snow and uncovered seeds.

The haze is our breath like a living artifact, bare-tree present.

These days are the night — the hollow cracking from stepping on an ice puddle that exists in other places than here.
This Hill

stretches and rolls
like a tired leg         like an agnostic prayer
or a tear slid to a stop on skin.

Overlooked day to day, this hill is earth
defining the sky, and the deer that pass
from its ridge to be lost in its shadows.

Outside the once-rural town,
this hill is isolated
because I will look nowhere else.
Bodies of Water

Lake Anne in Barberton.
Abra and Cadabra
the resident swans circled lazily
the block wide lake in the center of town.
(I called them gucks, swimming in the big juice; I still have family there)

Lake Bemidji, Ojibwa for Where the Water Turns,
—there was no Chief Bemidji, ignore the statue—
where people leave their trucks on the ice
to see which one falls through last.
(I broke up with my fiancé and spent days watching the ice break over the water)

Lake Superior, Gitchi Gummi, where
sailing is possible in the Midwest,
ships carry taconite and grain
from the elevators in Spirit Bay out
under the Aerial Lift Bridge.
(We drip-dried by bonfires on the Point after skinny-dipping — three nights a week)

The Mississippi — turning water of Bemidji —
shies away from Canada and makes for New Orleans.
In La Crosse, three rivers join, making marshlands
that shelter wildlife just a few blocks from campus.
(We would walk for hours at night, circling neighborhoods and breathing humid air)
Haiku

Spank the water, friend
  the wind picks up rapidly
canoe on to home

Cat sees through window
myself having a night smoke
I am moving

Hear the lake water
  lashing against the boulders
  drops hit the boardwalk

The warmth of coal fire
strongly wafts through the bookcase:
conversation couched
Superior, WI

I

Down these country roads,
each hill and curve
a repeated adventure.

Keep the soundtrack moving
Let the one-liners build into story

We keep cutting through
town, hoping for inspiration —
hoping something will happen;
wanting to get lost—
our own little Odyssey, but
always zigzagging back home.

II

Gitchi Gummi breathes out his fog so boldly
shrouding Duluth’s shore — its jagged rocks—
mocking mystic Avalon: “Dare you step forth?
compete with my density?”

III

bull in the field
wolf in the tree line
sturgeon in the depths
cat darting between dumpsters

harnessed and unleashed
domestic and wary
The wind hurries cold
from the lake and shadows dart —
deer across the street.

Downtown is nothing but bars
open an hour later than in Minnesota.
Glass diamonds the gravel lots and
we eye the strip clubs, peripherally.

Four weekend fishermen
drink coffee at 4am.
I’m walled by their guffaws.
They are more worldly than I
can be now — though they never
leave here, they have never been tourists.

They grow old in it — these
dawns on Lake Superior.

We sit and watch reruns
and documentaries.

We have so much history
together, it seems almost
awkward to share our experiences
apart.

We drive around
the city to the country and city again —
recreating.
**End Notes**

p. 1:  Lir was a king in Irish mythology. The story is that his second wife changed his children of his first marriage into swans who spent the rest of their lives flying along the coastal regions of Ireland.

p. 8:  *Vrikshasana* is the Sanskrit word for the “Tree Pose” in Yoga.

p. 14:  *Gringazo* uses Spanish constructions to mean being very gringo like. *Malinche* (bad/evil tongue) and *la Chingada* (the fucked woman) are both terms used to refer to Cortés’ consort and translator in Mexico. She is often viewed as a traitor, but the circumstances of her story are very complex and interesting.

p. 17:  *Decirte* is Spanish for “to tell you”

p. 32:  Cúchulainn is a hero from Irish mythology known for his strength and courage. He was mortally wounded in a battle then propped himself standing as he died — his enemies were afraid to approach him until a raven landed on his shoulder. The other references in this poem are from Greek and Native American mythologies.

p. 40:  *Gitchi Gummi* is one of several spellings for the Ojibwa name of Lake Superior.