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THE BOOK OF LEFT TURNS

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The University of Montana

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THE BOOK OF LEFT TURNS

By

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PARABLES, PARABOLAS

Wanting to become parables, we released
ourselves like crows into moonlight.
What did we hope for?
The hagiographer's headlamp.
What did we expect?
Parable's ineffable return.
But parable didn't want our milk
or milk money. It didn't want
our fragile hybrids. What it wanted
was to come into a body
as an arrow through the wild scar of an eyelid,
the singular expression of immanence,
which is what we are already, and the world
we know. But knock on the ground,
no one's home. Turn a key,
it's bound to resist. We imagine a door
and our stiffening bodies.
We see ourselves entering.
Though we remain, evidently, here.

THE BOOK OF LEFT TURNS

WE AWOKE TO THE PARTY

We awoke to the party, everyone knew about it,
so it started to look like an apotheosis
of work: a certain office, nameplate,
some beguiling new adumbration, wink wink nudge
wink. Most everything had happened already,
the table lamp broken, some turmoil over how so and so
knocked against so and so and started making out
with the sofa. But if the what knows the how
it cannot say. Alluvial moths pinned to time clocks,
we opened a can of whupass
with our high school ventriloquizing.
Strike! say the unzipped workers birthing babies.
Die! say the ablated teenagers who won't stop killing them.

I've seen this scene before.
Your face in the anteroom
palm on Easter Sunday.
Everyone hears you crying
except me, and by me
I mean Ingmar Bergman.

The room is white,
and you make yourself at home
you with your six hands in ash.

The wells are dry.
And by dry, I mean it like a code
the response to a question
you are about to ask
regarding the centuries
the 18th, 19th, and 20th.

In a time of plague
you have your murderous thoughts:
the room was white, white, white.
Ashes fell in their open sandwiches.
Blood was on your collar.
You were the one without a name.

The hero is asleep
when the red phone
rings him out of the dream
of tiny carnival rides.
He is in Ohio
and it is spring
on the Sandusky.
*There is a break-in
at West 23rd and Madison,
how soon can you get here.*
He wipes the sleep
from his eyes
throws away
the pillow, erases
all trace of his existence
in the motel.
Packs his perfume
samples
and turns his back
to the phone
when it rings
again. This time
it's the villain.
*Can we meet for coffee,
he says, we need
to talk. I'm just
finishing something up.*
On the table
is the matchbook
from the night before.
Inside there is a number.
*I don't think we've given each other
a fair shake, he says.
I think they've got you surrounded.
They know you're in there.*

When your love is leaving town
you call to say your love
is leaving town, which is leaving you
all over again. You thought
you wanted that,
you thought at last
you could be through with her humidifier
and green luggage.
You thought you would leave but you don't,
your part of the ceremony of regret.
To you they are memories,
to her they are things.
Things covered in dust.
Things there aren't enough rooms
to haul away in.
Things you curl up inside
to forget your own face
because the face she left
is not the face you have.
Now return everything.
Now take back what's yours.

Children are chasing floats
as you emerge
from the parking lot tunnel.
Across the arcade
is the wax museum electric chair,
one dollar, and you consider
finally reaching through the bars
and touching his hair.
Though you can't see it,
you imagine it's a light chestnut,
and he has bad skin.
You are late. People are nice
because they're looking for an exit.
You are tired. Tired
from writing your name
across a dozen trees,
tired from hearing the jury convict
every time.
Okay, so you're the villain.
You've been in that cape
for at least a month now.
Don't look so surprised.
Turn in your keys
and sign here, here, and here.

I was reading and left my thumbprint
on the story. It looked like a wound.
I said I was sorry. Sorry bird. Sorry
broken picture frame. I was pretending
to be in love, so it's hard to remember
distance, point to point
growing in different specializations.
One has fruit, one cries soup,
one sells candy from Eastern Europe
without expiration dates, but assures us
of freshness. The story and I have
come to some agreement when
it comes to affection. I push my head
into it, try to bury it somewhere.
And now I'm climbing under the table
to see if I can fit, and now I'm having a
staring contest with the ceiling. Shh.
Not now, this is important. Now
I'm bowing with arms outstretched
in a perfect downward facing dog. Now
I'm covered in dust. Now I'm learning to float.

Once I considered the narrative,
I saw it as a narrative of loss.
Birds trapped by sunlight.
One has grown a beard in its beak,
a letter for the philatelic girl
on the bridge in the park.
She has given up the burning leaves and grasses,
her perfumes and parasols,
her plans with regard to respecting.
Let them burn she says,
and compares herself to a flower.
In the shadow of birds,
the day becomes mendicant
as an old talkie,
and this is the final scene
where the hero disappears
into the smallest chalk drawing.
Once I considered, I went
to her, told her my plans
said *I am the hero,*
now can you please untie me.
And then the hero appears.
And then another and another and another.

LACEWING IN THE VIEWFINDER

the now and destination
a canopy of incurious birds
machines that fulfill their promise
what good is the eye if it can't be plumbed

when I crawled out from under your wings
hazy, coiled in segments
a vacuum at my back

I could swear I said something
out loud

haunting the bisected page the balloon
pulls things out of your pockets
ties them to your ears

the stations of the cross
the ring of the telephone

we are here and not here, she says
a body of grass, a field of ligatures

I thought I would return to the city, the city I thought I knew. I described it before, what it looked like, smelled like. But we always do this. That's why there's things. Things to look like. When they told me I was pregnant, I wasn't surprised. Something had been kicking me in the gut for weeks. At first I thought it was the donkey, but I shot the donkey. *Twins*. This was just one of several futures. In one, the train comes and you're in Chicago with a friend. Red line. Brown line friend. I've just jumped on the tracks and I don't want to talk about it okay. The camera is shy, a 15 year old boy really. You keep looking out the window at the commotion. You hope it's not bad, but it is.

Off to work in a rope-a-dope jetty. Check the boxes, find them accountable, enumerate each angel under our wings. Rope-a-dope. When we do good, there is a bell. When we does bad, two bells. Two happy workers, one terrified third. The boss adds-up the bells and evaluates our performance fairly and accurately. Thanks boss. We are mostly unnecessary. The boss records and simultaneously pipes-in ocean sounds into the warehouse. There is a slight delay. We tie machine parts to the dock, bob then sink. Good buy brave new world. Bones among the waveson like little dead accordions.

It is possible to make mistakes and tell the truth, but never at the same time. For example, each day we live in the day before. We wake up, look around, everything is just as we most likely left it, except all holidays are happening now. It's Christmas and everything is vaguely utricular. It's Valentine's Day and we're drowning in cards that conflate causality with social praxis. All garages are closed and we speak only in automotive metaphors. The theaters are open and playing the same chase scenes. Eggs are exploding confetti above the yard. Our sisters fall into the well and we unravel to save them.

It was April and the Germans were in the park with their kites and expletives sounding like the engines they're famous for. They ride scooters, are less fascist than the French nowadays. Still, we don't ask questions. Our kite's in the tree. Keep at it, we thought. We keep at it. We look at each other. We look for help. We look for scissors. The kite releases into crepuscular night, string wagging in accusation. Once she had told me you never know a city unless you've seen it at night, the light of the train and syringes clicking out each lunar cycle. We gave chase. Four days, learning how things could end.

Things didn't look good. The poem had become effluvial and frowsy, lost much of its joie de vivre. It happened when glass mistook for rain, little incandescent mews, dropped like a jaw suddenly, unexpectedly into the street. Only the doctor could save the poem from the mendacious bird's eye. Take me to the poem, the doctor says, holding a kidney in his left palm and a baby in the right. Hurry, the poem's not going to make it, someone says. The doctor says: Come on, come on. Theoretically, the poem could end. Realistically, we could lock the door. Villagers could cry out for hot water, towels. We could stay inside, we can skirt out. The doctor dandles, then makes the first incision. A spurt and a shudder, his bright hand tumbles through, in go kidney and baby. We are cruel because we are afraid of a world that will treat us harshly, c.f. World. Miriam, we must leave. The wicked shooter is on the hill with his tub of popcorn.

It is difficult not to laugh when Hertzog speaks of the implacable half-bored gaze of the bear foraging for food. Each day what's inside becomes something else we leave behind, remaindered in the shadow of the body left in state in the keyholed earth and the peripatetic selves that people it. Each day it rains while we are crying, failing to escape our debt, the villain hiding in the back seat. Does it matter that we fail to see him in the shiny red can of Coke or the wheelbarrow it invariably conjures up? Which me is standing guard? On what grounds have I learned to object?

THE NEW VOLUMETRICS

*

wear a pith hat
and tourists emerge
looking for a place
to hang their heads.
some have their own
guidebooks, others
look and find us
in the grass with our goggles
stuck with shrubbery.
everything looks so green,
including baseball,
the least organic sport
ever devised.
they say, come take our pulses
spring is in the air,
the bus isn't coming,
get off the bench.
we carry them
around the bases
before returning
to the dugout
for a peptalk from the coach.
you're making progress kid,
you've got spirit.
now get out there
and hit the little ball
with the little bat.
rain is hitting us in the face now,
like we stole its lunch money
or something
and that something looks like
a map of splinters
in an avalanche of pinecones.

*

we are the evidence of light and cold
and the cold that sinks us hollow
we admit nothing—
our willful imprecisions
and the monument in the field sprung from trees,
it is called Parabola, and her sisters, the moon,
and the sympathetic birds,
and neon signs. and you say
your life is just one avalanche after another,
one poultice after another,
and in this space between regret and knowing,
you've made an ice-castle populated by birds,
and it is your body, and it is a paper nautilus set by giant hand,
your life up there in the mountains,
one car coupled to the other in the machine grammar
of fustian fabric. if the natural state of things
is disorder, then how to unite you into the scene,
your standing at the corner of the bed
at what lies unfinished in the room?
and if to be complete is to be incomprehensible,
a white room deckled by white feathers,
do you blame the machine for fulfilling its promise,
or the engineer for his shortsightedness?
we've been granted resident alien status
for our failure to capitulate, but we don't know
anything about gifts, what to do with them,
assigning value—we cannot zoom out enough to see it
dangling as a blue ornament from the sun-spotted lamppost.
the universe is a nautilus
and our predominant mode of transportation
is the car. the hedgehog anticipates the scythes' pendulum swing
cutting the air as a train
through the remnants of its own making.
we are not ourselves. at an impasse,
in a contest, between the moon and what we leave
on the things we touch
and we're surprised at how much of us is inside
and a mystery. and the body is not your friend,
and your plans for the future you've made without consultation.
with what can we barter with the body?
of what can it know of the want we want it to know?

*

the laws of physics, the laws
of circular motion
the laws of levantism
coming to bear on the things
I can't get past, like
the way everything out my window
might be a poem. hey, maybe
that's a poem down there
in that red sweatshirt.
or how we make animal
noises to distinguish ourselves
from telephones,
how we invented telephones
to distinguish ourselves from each other.
it seems unfair
to feel shame for the wrongs
you admit to, like wet socks
or slight of hand,
the conversations you hear
through the doorway.
and it used to be about einstein,
and now it's about jesus
dressing up as an assassin
and shooting up the place
looking for a pen
and pencil set
that will express him
completely. turn over a fallen tree,
grubs, poisonous snakes.
jesus in a donkey suit.
jesus in a jesus suit.
jar sealed tightly, now open,
jesus. though acts of jesus
are not to be considered acts of god
or any of his apostles
and he cannot be held responsible
for the views expressed.
but aren't you supposed to be knocking?
shouldn't you be knocking harder?
because I don't know anything
about the past, except it's clearly against
us, like rain, or the act of selling,

which is too abstract a concept
to treat fully here. but since
disaster is only a matter
of sequence, and since
there are things I can't move past,
I'm buying a gun and a camera
and will open the door
and perform for the moviegoers.
it will look like things
they remember, and they'll
pull out their photos from their
tri-fold wallets
and we'll be in them,
or in front of them,
and maybe later, both.

*

we got to the beach
and the beach was gone.
gone with our gods
and lazyboy recliners,
gone with the boats
that kept knocking
at the lake's insistent waving.
we considered this
a function of the new volumetrics.
our t-shirts were full of sand
and we decided to invent fire
and then accidentally
burned down the neighborhood.
those who wanted
to do it all over again, did.
we built our homes
as exact replicas
of our neighbors'
and moved freely between them.
my children were always
glad to see me, my wife
a hand model,
and lovely as a peach.
at night we imagined our ceilings
a throng of stars
looking down upon us
wondering whether we're okay,
curious what our days
must be like without them.

EACH IS MADE FROM LINDEN WOOD

It wasn't meant for you to see, holiday.
Half moon pita of the eyelid, come look.
Look at the man turning to stone.
See how he stands, stone.
Dressed in gold lame, gold stone.
Linden wood. Rock salt.
Start the automobiles, I'm inventing.
Agate like bad teeth.
Hello mouth, you are about to say.
You will change.

THE PLAN

If you trust the market,
it will do its moo and give you a hard bingo.
Apart from the openings and the kiss bang endings,
its vehicle is mulish, pony express,
and the camera jams clam you up.
Either things are in front of you
or they're on back order.
On the beach, more flypapers approach friction.
One lost for lack of enthusiasm
wants a canvas in Caracas,
which is an ablution or conclusion,
where the take finds a horse
and flies to smaller islands of pure sound.
Your catalogue is like a bus of shock at the end.
A box of Saint Christophers. Terrific.
All we lack is a telephone and an aesthetic,
and this island is crowded with enormous saunas
from the eyelids of stark figurines.
For the television translators see their translations.
Read them like signposts to the afterlife.
We are wanderers in moon sonority here.

WHAT WANT, WHAT CAN

California is burning. Omaha,
you get pinched for arson
and for your aquiline nose and heavy French accent.
Que veux, que peux, you say.
Look to the birds, you say.
I don't forgive you.
Light doesn't bend in water.
You will return—
an omnibus of dates and *fruit de mer*
and say, I have returned
as in a pinch of salt
silver, wearing a dress unmade.
The moon remains unfazed and failing.
It cannot see you.

WHITE MOOSE

I wanted it to tell me about want
or the fixtures attached to my forehead.
Instead it signed its name with my finger
in wood signed Signatory. It was happy and cruel.
And that made me happy, too.
I was documenting envy and it stole the scene.
It was a good scene with colors,
it was black and white
and carved in stone and signed Possible Exception.
My one eyelid started twitching good news,
testicular cancer. I had sex on film
and couldn't stay put. I reached for a cigarette
and found a woman's finger
and stamped it out with my eyeball,
which made me happy for it.
I was rich, in love, happy and cruel.
I wanted it to cure my bulimia,
turn it into an exquisite sense machine
or a white rabbit
made from dead pigeons.
Instead it carved an idol out of stone,
it was glass and learned to say no.
It asked me to stop staring at things.
I made a pact to leave it alone
so long as it stopped embarrassing me in public.
I gave it my eye and said see what you can do.

GETTING OVER THE PAGE

I am looking to get over the page,
the way granting rights implies a leisure class

the way they say in Chicago,
electricity discovered the blues.

In 2016, it will be the Olympics.
The Olympics! Everyone at the table with their

hats and small teeth discover sublimation
some really important shit.

Then they think of the page,
the page I fill

until the page looks full,
like the man peering through a shop window

the one without a place to sit.
I pretend it doesn't see me.

and the page, in turn
pretends it doesn't know me.

We make eyes.
We bite each other's heads off.

RIVER GUARD

The ferry that delivers you, cracked lips and milk,
is too full of tetra, small appliances, too numerous.
A mother chases her children around the bollard
when the diapason blows.
Squeeze anything hard enough and you get a universe.
Everything folds inward and becomes utricular
and comes back fruit bats. Epiphytes like stars.
You could call the whole scene
Morning of the Olive Trees and Streetlamps
or Inverted Moonlight, or Sun-Locked Observation,
if the take wouldn't be ruined by it.
Rice falling from the jacquard sky,
you have no choice but to breathe the macule in,
and with it, the smell of poultry,
the rusty pram, perfunctory conversations
about weight and scale. And then comes the signal.
The semaphore's incantation of day,
the moon's algolagnia. When it's done,
her fingers will find where your molars used to be.
In the fluorescent eyes of morning
she is illuminated with the river.
Not enough water to evaporate.
Not enough chasuble censures against sleep.

Across the Mino in its singing tune of time, we sucked dewlaped ether, a hummock of loneliness. What isn't? An antelope rising itself out of the telephone. Its growing stable-hands. Autumn breaking through the soliloquy. What we might find are sunsets making eyes at who you were, the other making plans. That the day could become mendicant. Call it, Oversight. Wait. That's the sequel—the high-cut bunkhouse, a girl comparing herself to a flower. *La jette, histoire d'horreur!* In this town there are rocking chairs for every cemetery.

How long has the water coursed the caverns in my arm? How long have cartographers made havoc with the crenellate end of days? When is the last thing you remember? What will it take to get you to come down? How long have I been looking at this long tested landscape? Where are those orange groves you mentioned? Who is that standing in the yard? How long until my eyes adjust?

We are kissing carrion hemmed green branches calling. I'm sorry, but these days my head is full-up, everything coming down from the roof. I've heard vocatives lost in telephony flinder in your ancient bedroom. I can't tell what shape I'm in. I'm afraid you won't return my calls because you and everyone at the party decided I'm sexist which is totally not sexy. I've seen your answering papers conversing with strangers. I am leaving my skin for old. I am not a good guess.

THIS MIGHT BE TRUE

Are subjective truths true, even if they're mediated by universal categories?

Is it true, that even if we can't define universal categories, that there are universal categories?

When I say I love you, am I simply saying I love your desire for my desire for your desire?

Is that true?

Am I true, if I'm lying to you, but not cheating on you?

If I am cheating on you, is there a game?

Is it my turn?

Do we take turns?

If I say truly, doesn't that mean I've just been lying?

Is it true that now to deconstruct means to just take shit apart?

Isn't that what analysis is?

If there's an analysis, does that presuppose an analyst?

Am I qualified for this?

Have I applied for this job?

Am I hungry?

Do I want a sandwich?

Is it enough to say language is unstable?

Does that make everything permissible?

Is it true, the smaller the font, the more authority it has?

Is it true that nostalgia is fascism?

Does that make memory fascist?

Does that mean that I am a dictator?

Does that make me a dick?

Does "that's true" mean you've made a good point?

If I say, like a good old philosopher, that the object is truth, does that mean the "proper study of humanity?"

Is that nostalgic?

Do I deserve this?

Have I done this to myself?
Is this a game?
Am I in a trap?
Is there a way out?
If I say no, does knowing make me guilty of something?
Are we all guilty of something?
Does knowing that alleviate our guilt?
Does asking questions make me their author?
Is Surrealism just a lamer version of Dadaism?
Is Dadaism just a lamer version of Catholicism?
Is the interrogative an appropriate form for the question?
Are any of our forms adequate to questions?
Have I forgotten anything?
Is it troubling that authentic means “made in the manner of a region?”
If the hostess mispronounces my name, is she the only one in the room who actually knows it?
Am I lying if I answer her?
If I say on the contrary, am I just upholding established norms?
Are all declaratives in a limited sense?
If that’s true, in a limited sense, does that negate their appeal to truth?
Does Jane know the answers to these questions?
Is she really bored?
Are Spot the dog, Puff the cat, or Jack the clown?
Can everything be read as a series of commands?
Am I perverted?
Is this outfit understated?
Are my desires mine if I have to tell you about them?
Because initially I wrote lemur instead of lamer, is that more true?
Have I finally shown up on the radar?
Are those cameras on?
Does the pain in my tooth tell me anything about myself?
Am I a good lover?
Are jokes the only things that really can’t be funny?

If I have to explain it, does it mean the joke's on me?
Is that when it becomes funny?
Is that when it becomes true?

PROLEGOMENON TO THE BOOK OF LEFT TURNS

It is the end of a long campaign,
and the bird in your throat
foals the shoreline,
transforms serpents
into sticks on the borborygmic
laundromat floor.
Your senses told you
what was missing.
They died right *there*.
There were bells and a bell tower,
branches intersecting branches,
letters saying more letters would come.
That was her picture on the table,
you followed her
and didn't leave for thirteen years.
A hawk cleaves the pier
as out of the vision of apostate fish.
After thirteen years,
you finally see it:
a boy in a black suit,
ray gun, fat cheeks whistling.

STRANDED

Listen now, it will fill your tire with mosquitoes
if you let it. There's gold in the Mohave,
and it's time we got to burying it. Forget
your Midwestern bovinities, let's waltz
the rumba. I'm captivated by your sweet tooth.
My apartment looks ridiculous,
like it's been hit in the face with a softball.
Come in with your suitcase.
Come in with your suit,
your mower, your happy pancakes.
My drawers are open. Miriam,
there are two kinds of people.
The first sends postcards. The other
makes paper hats.
Even now, twilight is creeping in
like a debutante late for a cotillion. Make way
for the earface enemas
she says, tossing biscuits to the cocker spaniel.
To the woman in heels, the weatherman
says it's going to rain in four minutes.
If only we knew what he meant.

LUNG MERIDIAN

I found you wandering like a fly
stuck in an airport terminal,
wine emanating from your bucket of sound.
The boat was your friend, you made it,
a red scarf with your name
announced your arrival with coins.

I was tired and you were writing promises
across a dozen trees. I knew
by the way you said Hello Dear Teacher,
I am writing this to you, your handlers
are not to be trusted.

We fought, and after
you bandaged my ears
with salt and rosemary leaves
saying you'd sewn your hands
to a bale of hay,
those palavering antelopes,
keepers of deadlines
and country sculleries,
their bowls of black currants.

LANDSCAPE WITH FUTURE TENSE

That moon's going to be a fake,
will save its propaganda,

show us what eyes don't change.
Knock knock: there will be moons elsewhere.

Shirtsleeves on the floor, a practical joke.
All the moons have loved before.

Dancehalls will find the pennies
morning covers like a bruise.

Bodies will insist
medical dictionaries reveal their antinomies.

Will out with your promises, opulent fingers. Will
in with your cameras. Will not help us off this table.

We will complain. Why do we even ask.
We will complain.

Phones will stop their ringing.
We won't owe them a thing.

PARABLES, PARABOLAS

There comes a point
in every disaster,
where like a nightgown

to a weather vane,
there comes this story
this nepenthe

an historical contingency
that posits me as historically
contingent, where I collapse

the contoured epenthesis
a letter, a syntax, part
of an inexorably rendered unity

in the ancient
traditions of our peoples.
Of course, I'm dying.

Disaster is counting on me.
I am counting on disaster.
The story is counting to three.

And the story might have been
about how each baseball player
couldn't find home.

And the story might have been
about a crane or a whistle,
or there was no wind to whistle.

It might have been about wanting
to be the heartbreaker.
It could've been important.

It could've inferred certain standards.
Evoked French towns,
some cows asleep in a field.

In it, a picture
could've passed

for a single word.

It could've begun
with the whites of my eyes.
How you don't shoot.

I can't tell you
how many stories begin
like this one.