

## NINE SONNETS FOR LATE '90S LITERARY CULTURE

### The Midwest : *First semester sponsored talk*

Meistersinger grabs the shears,  
hiccup at the fraenum.  
To tell what he sang would  
break the code, force the school of shad  
apart from the other  
American food fishes,  
“the very prop  
on which drapery’s purpose  
hangs.” Warming up  
the cotton with a hot iron,  
the soothing,  
motivating  
muscles  
of our arms.

### Artist Friends : *Poem For McSweeney’s*

I wanted to make a video, my matted brown  
soccer-player hair flew, ears  
reddened  
as when in the throes of an actual encounter.

Ingrid spontaneously brought me chicken,  
made fun of my absurd  
mock-Trenchtown stylings  
upon giving notice.  
I had even imagined  
the cabinets.

Several worn flakes of heart  
set to feed the porter.  
Kind basket  
bartle the fisket.

Editorial or Publicity : *Poem for the New Yorker*

Mesmerized by my own life,  
a shower of potential, an alien form  
listing from side to side along the rows of cubes,  
ducking in for humane chat that quickly grows  
oppressive. The move to escape  
family tyranny in fact an exchange for co-workers  
foibles and bile, the phone glimpses, snatches of yells,  
the difference in the level of impingement like being  
in a bunch of grapes instead of part of a melon.  
I like that shirt; my silence at your haircut earns me  
the nickname *Tacitus* so warm is my implicit approval.  
The pleasure of engaging the electric pencil sharpener  
mitigated by its lack of a shaving sink, a gap where  
the plastic bin, miniature but precisely machined, should be.

You are shorter, you are taller, you are lovely, you are smart,  
you are anxious, you are over your head but thickly blissful.  
Wool crepe so radiant black, blue.  
Gabardine is back too.

Interview Journalism : *Poem for the back of the New York Times Magazine*

Always bare-armed, catching cold,  
Keitel torsoes toward the piano,  
wolfs a smoke and drenches half the site in filial  
light and bird-like song, uplifting and tired.  
Dorothy as control freak;  
discovery of Oz as techno-mastery,  
Lleyton Hewitt clutching Kim Clijsters's cross.  
We toss thoughts like painted balls—  
errhumanized, without a title, bouncing up  
the musical, muscled beach with determinate fuzzy digits.  
People throw bread to the birds  
out the back windows of hospitality.  
Adjuncts and attributes violate our condition  
that branches should not be allowed to cross.

The Midwest : *Second semester*

We allow our attention to spread outward,  
like dropped laundry.

Immune to ideas,  
we pitch our way  
through the sugary  
thickness to an amazing veldt,  
salted rodeo, place  
pointless calls to the hoofy satyr.

“Extraordinarily adept,  
the highwaymen  
glide wave-like in fields  
tilled by people with jobs.”

Lifting the horn  
with three arresting blasts we ride off.

Fiction : *A choice*

Tapping,  
slow

and  
tedious,

consummate  
and firm.

Trollopine,  
gigallistic.

Animal prints  
are hot.

Scan  
for inevitable

bass  
response.

Nostalgic Hypochondria : *Double Holiday Sonnet for the New Yorker*

It's Christmas so I climb into my bigger car,  
bundle up the newspapers and toss them  
among the husky rocks.

You mentioned Cheops, like bird sounds,  
but I can't quite make the bilabial pop and throat clack,  
though fastidious enough.

Had to go see Leventhal,  
so I figured I might as well see Tesser,  
so I got two referrals from the Walfish,

who nodded when I told him what they were for,  
settle a few old scores.  
GP fans out into trinity.

Nightmare trip across the fragmented ferment  
of the slate gray sky at night,  
or nearing night,

breath rocketing out in unmentionable  
rasps, condensing under the nose;  
I thought then it was a drip

dipping down toward  
the top raw,  
kind of bloody maw.

A little hesitation stepping off the sidewalk,  
a little bread broken into the waveletted life  
of wiry shore birds, coordinated diving, stopping off.

Most's has closed,  
Stern's has dropped its veil  
everything's  
on sale.

Alone Together : *Colony*

If subordination implies weakness  
then each embedded clause  
adds another bean  
to our febrile sack.

Make the glazier on your back  
take off his shirt, turn over  
the black empathic pitch,  
cool limey pile.

The air,  
heavy with bricks,  
leans toward the van's rack,  
spilling mannequins into the mock Public Garden,  
accepting all equally  
easily.

Ethics : *Poem for the New Republic*

We are both Jewish like Gertrude and Alice  
and don't practice like them.  
We had to go to that part of the cemetery.  
I suppose it's good that they have one.  
If Louis Zukofsky had died in Paris,  
or had Louis Untermeyer.  
I wonder what Alice had to do when buying the plots.  
Had they bought them together first,  
or did Alice buy them after.  
Or I think it's one plot.  
Anyway, it probably wasn't: *Madame, excusez-moi,*  
*mais ce n'est pas possible d'acheter cet plot.*  
It was probably: *oui, j'ai besoin d'un terrain*  
*là-bas.*

The Midwest : *Third semester*

Extraordinarily adept,  
the highwaymen  
glide wave-like  
in fields of unkind,  
sordid endeavor:

“To service the loon we must have proof  
that the markings you put down  
can be pinned to your identificatory tooth,  
once removed. You must be  
undimmed in your affections  
for the secret handshake and shoes,  
for without them we are damned, doomed  
to walk to court without riding,  
completely unable to mount.”

House with Bones : *with Wallpaper\* in the mailbox at the end of the driveway*

As part of the mix,  
the complexities of academic settings.  
When we got home, the telephone rang.

We punched windows in the side, had to use cutters,  
but they built next to us and chalk flew in the soup;  
they'd hit the water table.

“It's sweet, it's fine,” we murmured.  
Young and dopey, our Hope

can't sleep as pea pods get  
crushed, wheat husks threshed for her sister's car seat.

Clamoring for your softique,  
floating spongily on the bed as Rome burns,

“I can no longer see them, far beyond the parapets....”  
Yogurt on hand. Makes a nice caked cream.

New Jersey : *Poem for Knopf*

Since it's all pig shit,  
turf

controls the criticism,  
grapeseeds

smother wineries,  
querulous jackrabbit

bites  
sink skin.

25 is the new 30.  
Sensibility is the new sense.

Deb's picks make  
Huppy

Henry  
totally spin.

The Midwest : *TAskip , Stipend, Thesis*

Fiddle on the diddle,  
and if your creamy shirt  
is yours, and your pen  
scratches witchily over Crane's,  
why not buy the guy a slice?

I'm at the front of the room  
smiling, didactic.  
I'm wearing a prophylactic,

"the very prop  
on which drapery's purpose  
hangs." Warming up  
the cotton with a hot iron, the soothing,  
motivating muscles  
of our arms.

Exercise : *Therapy*

Can't talk to you  
in nakedese

or touch  
the perfect

arcs of your  
ponytail.

My mother  
as control freak

vacuums the sky,  
vacuums the vitamin tree.

I vacuum  
my heart,

drive through the disgusting,  
well-sunned depths

toward  
Gargantua.



The Midwest : *Advisor*

I coddle you, and I  
couldn't have spoken then, or now

my long lashes brushing softly against the pine,  
approaching Amber.

The lasts are petering out, the shoes  
sloughing to a stop;

the birds grip tight the branches  
and hearts

pulse up the breast.  
Seen?

Or not.  
Roll up sleeves;

roll one for me,  
please.

The Midwest : *Commencement*

Loading up the spernum,  
juicing up the amp,  
cussing up the spittle,  
pewing up the damp,

making several portals,  
poking several heads,  
leaning back to mission,  
corking up the beds,

the sunny farmer boy leaves home,  
leaves it sitting on the fence.

Touching the knob,  
tentatively pressing himself into space.

Touching  
little buds of breath that cloud the storm.

## Development

does not make a steady  
advance;

after an early efflorescence,  
a very decided interruption:

*If form were all,  
'my ass discharges  
a sour mash'  
would be a great line!*

Ugh. As if attempting to save itself, it has learned  
to keep itself in suspension for a while,

fending off piles with spelt and felt—anything felt,  
but far too little

is known about the mental  
make-up of newborns.

Series : *from The Mill on the Floss*

Every encounter compromised  
*by lazy acquiescence and lazy omission,  
by trivial falsities for which we hardly know a reason,  
by small frauds neutralized  
by small extravagancies,  
by maladroit flatteries,  
clumsily improvised insinuations.*

*We live from hand to mouth, most of us,  
with a small family  
of immediate desires  
which keep us locked in an insane nursery,  
we do little else than snatch a morsel  
to satisfy the complaining brood—  
infirmes élu.*