

The Surveyor's Perspective

BY

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DISSERTATION

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EM

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SUMMARY

A number of these poems are about a specific place, the features of which are fairly consistent. There are roads, small animals, common birds, and tract housing. But also present are diminished things—relics from an earlier time period when the bulk of the area was farmland. The question that Robert Frost’s “Oven Bird” asks—“what to make of a diminished thing”—is relevant in poems that grapple with the impulse to preserve relics and make them objects. My poems that allude to the history of this place trace a constructivist impulse in humans consistent with the one that exists today. Yet my speakers are also skeptical of the ability “to regain / what can’t ever be // recovered” (“On Metaphor”). To an extent, this skepticism is a result of their subject positions: if they are not entirely outside of the landscapes they portray, then how do they get a clear purchase, as it were, a single, final perspective? These poems attempt to prolong what is fleeting in the landscape, and yet my speakers question the poet’s ability to survey completely; that is, they question their ability to survey without overlapping their perspectives with what other people thought or did, especially in an ekphrastic context. I refer to processes of construction—artistic but also biological—in order to show that perspective is supported with detail and contextually grounded.

I.

The Surveyor's Perspective

Think *map* as you inspect what counts or doesn't count
for part of the historical fabric. Just call the chicken house

structure, and move on. What's intact, you've learned,
is the upside of ruinous. What's ruinous is documented

before it disappears. What disappears—this is what it means
to go out with guns blazing as someone else is taking

the bull by the horns. What you mean to say is that
farmland is perforated by surveyor stakes—you artfully

flag the expandable holes: pools in the yards of new
tract houses, which *dwarf the limestone farmhouse*. Or so

the caption will one day tell us. At its root, *cap*-tion is still
attempting to seize. Here is the window of the image,

here's the porch's overhang. Here are the shutter's busted
washboard ribs—think *music by the handle of a spoon*.

Cedar Road

Midday, sunny: excavators
 are digging expressways
through the corn. The dust
 is steady; the pin oak
churns and spits. Last night,
 when the moonlight
through my window backlit one
 handprint, I pressed
the glass, thinking my palm
 was a match. Does it
matter what you carve from the
 fields? Take the road
I travel most, but circa 1873.
 Two brothers, compilers
of the atlas map, drew Cedar
 Road as if from a
daguerreotype: a horse and carriage
 passes by the residence
of one VAN DUSER. They
 had to make it all fit:
Van Duser's fields, farmhouse,
 barn and kitchen garden,
pin oak towering over his grove
 of pines. Plus his drive
like a tributary feeding
 the road these passers-
by are traveling, the other
 side of the shut front gate.

Apiosporina Morbosa

*She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds
Have parted hence; and still that length of road
And this rude bench one torturing hope endeared,
Fast rooted at her heart...*

-Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage*

The black knot
in the chokecherry tree

started as a swelling
beneath petiole,

undetectable
when racemes

of flowers clustered
like grapes. If only

she'd had faith
that ascospores would

populate,
or questioned

the face value
of beauty—

because when the seasons
changed and leaves

buckled under
rain, the gall

was obvious: against
sky something cast

iron; against *stark—*
silhouette

and *disease*.

Unwritten History of a Midwest Settlement, ca. 1831

Call it the winter of

Deep Snow:

six-foot drifts,

settlers without
homes; and oak,
hickory, black

walnut. Hands
the color of roses.
What the saw

scrapped or bore
rotted was cut
into firewood,

a filament
more luminous
than warm.

But the good wood—
they must have
seen it green

as the blade
swung, seen
their porches'

kerosene lamps
in the spark
of the blade's teeth

on dirt, on bark.
How else
could they have

volunteered
for the births,
the milk, the mornings

without a bath to
clean the plate?
They were cold and hungry.

The Last March

after the painting *The March to Valley Forge* in *The American Journey* textbook

There weren't
many options for shoe-

less soldiers
tracked by their

bloods through
the tundra that Trego

painted. Some
made moccasins

from a *scrap of*
cowhide, but that

fact originated
in the memory of

a young private from
Connecticut, whose

companions over-
lap without

horses to break
them apart: *This is*

my body. Each
trail of alizarin

crimson is lost as the
regiment unspools

backwards—men
becoming face-

less until they're
dabs blended

to make one white-
washed stroke of

burnt sienna, filling
the wood like

leaves underfoot.

The Partitioned Task

The first worker harvests
the seed, then *carries*

her load along the trail
until she meets an

unladen ant. We assume
that this is optimal,

like a bucket brigade
for transporting water

when the alternative
is to strain yourself.

As *Figure 1* shows,
she rolls her seed without

hesitation to a transfer
partner roused from sleep.

But the scientist doesn't
clarify *unladen*—

what's crammed in
the pheromone he calls

stink is working for the good
of a single brain.

All I Know

How to splice modern
day with an extinct

species like *Ectopistes*
migratorius?

No footage exists
of the ninety-

square mile nesting
becoming

a weather system
the area of today's

Clarksville,
Tennessee.

All I know is that
wild pigeons

stripped the fields
strewn

with shit
and plumage.

So I study
swarm behavior

to say what they
must have done:

came in
off the water

following three
basic rules

for how to be
unoriginal:

stay close,

synchronize

*your movements, avoid
collision.*

Still Life

If you ask how to photograph
flying birds, the advice is
to *pan at the same speed*
as the bird is flying.
So that must mean
that stationary things
deserve our look and stare.
But what happens when you're
the one moving as if stop-
and-go down a city street,
and you catch in your periphery
something still?

You have to turn and pan it; pan
with no zoom, pan so that the boy
I see at the corner of Harrison
is only *about* to cry under
the *Hospital* sign—or could he be
simply lost? Like a coin
tossed up, a flock of
blackbirds flashes silver
when it flips, end
over end. Look at his arms
as you're passing,
his arms too long
for his unfinished height.

Bird for Bird

Flash of blue: the jay, *what color
blue was that*; or should I ask

what color the late summer
sky was: *azure-stone, lapis-*

lazuli, or *cerulean* gets me one
step closer, but the bird hides

itself. If only one could study
the jay as it is, but acting like

the killdeer, who offers itself
instead of its shallow nest:

*watch me drag my fake broken
wing*. And then be surprised

that watching it come undone
is distracting enough

(look how the killdeer's copper
rump is uncovered by coverts)

to believe that ivory-black
splattered eggs are stones.

Most People Are Familiar with Robins

First you preen as if combing smoke
from a cloud's edge—that kind of

godliness is in you, even as a *familiar*
gray bird. Then remember nothing

of this work: your wings rise and
hover, opening to a span that

a coryphée mimics when she pushes
rising water away with soft

fingertips. But then you run-and-
stop the course of my lawn, hunting

the thread that unravels us—
waiting for assistance from the wind.

Constructing Audubon's *The Birds of America*

The first time he stooped
to observe a specimen of

American robin or *migratory*
thrush in the lower half

of a *Prunus caroliniana*, Audubon
had left his rifle at home.

He took notes: the female was gray-
headed and occupied

with breakfast; her breast was a
duller orange than the dark-

headed male's, and their un-
fledged young were white-

throated. But instead of describing
how the male's tail fanned

when he dropped down to feed
chicks meant to be kept hidden,

Audubon wrote *star top, column*.
He marked an x on his map,

left for his gun, and went back.

Pull the Wool Away

Why did I drive here
except for a purely

visual experience
that can't hold

sun low and yellow
as a yolk

whisked over
ruminant cattle

excreting methane
I breathe in

and expel
thinking

*What's the farmer
feeling*

as he frees
his goat from

the woven wire

The Mushroom Farmer

A new housing development threatens to budge [her] another time, for the last time.

-Goodness Greeness "Farm Spotlight"

I read about her *digging*
her heels in

soil that tended to
ball up

on the plow. The feature
story is her chance

to self-promote,
even though nothing

will save her
from eminent

domain, including
her revulsion

for starter spawn.
Yet her perspective is so

specialized—
the public can't

translate it.
Who cares

that she uses
manure, which stems

from *maneuver*?
Here she is

among the fruiting
bodies, shining

her lamp over racks
of shitake.

Their spores require

such sterility—

a room like a cave
with the ground

swept clean.

On Metaphor in the *Rural Historic Structural Survey of New Lenox Township*

Thanks to Wiss,
Janney, Elstner

and Associates,
I can spot

a spindle work porch
and jig-

saw cut trim. But PIN
08-36-200-

*015 is a structure
in crisis; their nod*

to public perception
(*while to some*

*it may appear as an
abandoned wreck)*

suggests they've
imagined

wood beneath artificial
siding

and switch
metaphors:

*sufficient historic fabric
remains. Why try*

to regain
what can't ever be

recovered?
Before Takigawa

arranged photo-
degraded plastic

caps in rows like

avocado rolls,

he went
to the aquarium.

How to Leave a Farmhouse

Beyond the mossy stoop, flanked
by pines like stalwart weeds,

the farmland is newly hemmed
by the interstate. On it you

ascend like teeth when a mouth
opens to sing. The wind-in-your-

hair feeling is like forgetting
yourself run ragged: a kerchief

only flaps that side of the wind-
break: massive bur, understory

trees; triplets of ironwood cut out
for leverage. You'd worked in

private. Now they're everyone's
blue printed curtains, chard plantlets.

II.

Magnolia

Give me one
reason why I
should dream of

the magnolia suddenly
bloomed and not
some careful

budding or fledgling
light green leaf.
Isn't spring

supposed to be
inconspicuous?
The buds containing

next year's
leaves are the
visible signs of

inward changes—
painfully slow.
The sun has to warm

sugar stores
to boiling point
so foliage

can emerge, retain
sheen through
summer. But in my dream

buds burst into
whorls of crepe
paper petals

with a flourish of
the performer's
arm: deep-set

pink against new-
growth brown.

Degas's *The Dance Class*, 1874

It's the ballet master's elbow we see
 mirrored in the foremost dancer's
casual second position, in the bleachers
 where the waiting girls are as
sharp-edged as the mirror-frame, poster
 frame, doorframe, or crook
of two walls' shell-colored crown molding.
 Unwittingly, these sisters
share their evergreen tree shape with
 the cityscape. But the student
who executes an arabesque or attitude
 (her leg is hidden under tulle)
knows the suggestion of *épaulement*
 is like an antique find or
swath of gild: take, she says, your cue
 from these walls brushed
a bluish eau-de-nil. This is how to
 soften the bones of the thumb,
or the whole hand—inclined to curl
 like the rose's whorl, the one
near the base of the music-score stand.

On Stieglitz's *Gable and Apples*

At first glance, I thought
cherries. But that's the difference
between drupes and pomes—
not a matter of size, but of framing
their weight. Cherries cluster.
Instead, each of the four staggered
apples dangles with the force
of attraction to earth. But gravity,
for him, was easy—look at how he
manipulated aperture,
collapsing the distance
between foreground and background,
apples and gable. Think of the tide
bringing in a sound wave
long after a note's struck.

September Chokecherry

When the wind bends
the tree forward—
then you'll see the leaf
drop. See it curled
at the drip line? Wine-
stained, serrated.
I'd thought this
month too nonchalant
to come in or go out
like anything. September's
hint of yellow is also
the summer's coreopsis
still in bloom.
But the chokecherry—
who can blame
its quick thinking?
There's winter in those
first bare branches,
budless brush
against the sky.

Give and Take

All forms of landscape are autobiographical.
-Charles Wright

I'd describe myself as a white sea
 without a coastline; without a cliff-
side to interrupt me, I am water
 breeding water: I have no
southernmost point. But at the *Cliffs*
 of *Moher*, the crests and
troughs of each wave are chisel and
 stone dust: thick white
outline of an obelisk that's
 always being forged. Think
of the Atlantic reputedly eroding
 rock shale and sandstone—
while the puffin lays its one egg
 in the same burrow as last year
and sea pinks domesticate the salt.

On Likeness

*Researchers believe "Jane" arrived...just months before the worst of the
"starving time."*

- Historic Jamestowne

The features most likely
to be recognized by

those who know me—
hair color, eye

color, identifying scar
between my brows—

are open
to interpretation

if I'm found
by excavators

in the future.
My remains unearthed

would be conclusive proof
that I existed,

just as Jane did
before she starved

to death—
twenty years younger

than I am. But Science
doesn't re-

construct her
without the imagination

giving her pale
lashes, nearly

black irises,
chapped lips.

Matryoshka

This doll, painted
to resemble a peasant woman,
has blue eyes,
do-a-dot pink cheeks, and is
wearing trumpet bell-shaped
poppies instead
of clothing. I read about
the morphology of the red
poppy, a process so
abrupt that a calyx seems *to lose*
its identity at once, as it has
here, in the outer-
most doll: only the leaves can be
called the *calyx*. But we can
go back: the buds
of its breasts are not so easily
lost. Designed to nest,
the matryoshka doll
splits, top from bottom, to reveal another
figure from the same
stripped block of balsa.
The eye color goes—the lower
lashes disperse like shavings.
Poppies fold into
themselves—how small
can they get? The inner-
most doll is like the calyx:
not the green leafy top,
but the whole straw-
berry.

What He Saw

In Williams's "The Great Figure," the poet describes how he watched a fire engine clanging through Manhattan on a rainy night.

-Judith H. Dobrzynski, The Wall Street Journal

When Demuth
led the poet

to his portrait,
was Williams tired

of being associated
with the images

in his poems?
I imagine him

homing in on a gram
of congruent

triangles, profile
reflected in

bone char and
vegetable oil.

He nodded:
the effect was

cinematic—
smoke swirled

like undiffused
light wafting

into a stagnant
room where

boys made
cigars for

men in black tie.

Figure 34

after the negative by Alexander Gardner

How limited
the plate is

once the image
has been fixed.

Why is each face
hidden in the next

body's armpit
as if there's no

difference
among them?

I imagine this man
closest to

the plate edge
had the foresight

to know he'd
make a less-than

sign—
unbuttoned

britches
a tuft of pubic

hair exposed
to the lens

like a train
in a tunnel.

Resistant

Your eyes start out on the sides of your head.
-Dr. Michael Mosley

On the sand, watching
boogie-

boarders glisten
with salt,

I'm un-
comfortable

in skin that
travels with me,

is still there
behind my

hat and giant
shades—

or do I control
the way I see

myself stand
out, not

in a good way?
There was a fish

in the beach
parking lot,

blocking the light.
Oxygen

had turned its gills
to wet napkins.

I felt
sorry for it

set down

like a stone
in a land-
scape of
rippling silk.

Port de bras, or Carriage of the Arms

The arm should not move
from the elbow or the wrist.

I watch the girl make these
points disappear, as if she

has no bones but scapulae:
a monarch's forewings, wet

and crinkled. She follows
her cupped palm while her

teacher's voice repeats like
an instar: *there is a string in-*

side of you, uncoiling like
a proboscis. In the viewing

room, dimly lit so that I can
see through the half-silvered

surface, I'm still envious.

Lophelia pertusa

Oil rigs, which provide a firm base, have enabled it, in certain circumstances, to establish itself and grow.

-Niall Bell, marine biologist

Due to the unforeseen
use of idle

iron, magnified
coral looks

alien—*established*
by man or as

an escape. Imagine
a cauliflower

floret untouched
by trawlers—

blooming white on
white, uncut.

The *Cercis canadensis*

will not get my
attention

while each
corolla is

perfect
rose

part of
the overall

picture
but if my vision

is restricted
by degrees

the earth
rotates

below
the horizon

then the red
bud purples like

a neon
storefront

III.

Will

When I was young, I read this book. When
I was young I, too, read *Charlotte's Web*.

I think of being young whenever I hear
cilantro called *coriander*. Try it, and you

will think of Fern at the county fair. But
having grown, would she have picked

the milking stool over the Ferris wheel?
The gusset over the top-stitch, the wall over

the open air? Someday, I'll smile and say,
When you were young we read together.

You'll pour tea. I'll sit. Outside a finch
will prattle. Imagine us, and you will think

of water draining through a colander. If
pressed to choose, always read what I read.

Crisis

This, too, my mother says, *shall pass*. Meaning not what was averted but what will be short-lived. *This*: a cornucopia of dust and pill-boxes—still-life on the nightstand she comes to swipe off. Replaces it with tinkling ice, straw like a concertina. Something there is that does love a wall, patiently waiting to hear what ails. So when she finds the loophole: she'll be there, my mother says, *lock-stock-and-barrel*. *I'll be there with corkscrew and hammer*. She leavens her bread so my joints dovetail. She's practiced the art of closing remarks. In the embankment, she shovels snow.

Cyclamen persicum

From *kýklos*—cycle. Known
for blooming when others go
dormant. Last November,
I took home a hardy cyclamen
from my local greenhouse. Then
it was in full bloom: stalks
high in the plant's dense
crown, its petals flexed
instead of splayed. And later,
a gradual nod once the stems
turned ripe, coloring
purplish green.

But this winter,
a poor showing; I think
I keep the house
too warm. A lone flower spurts
against my window: flash of
magenta. Outside,
the grass is just straw.
Here comes a van
stopping at the nearby
dumpster, its driver quick about
whatever he empties in.
The birds above him, settled
on the telephone line,
warm to some
winter conversation.

Pink Remnant

Behind the row of swollen
Scotch pine, a farmhouse.
Blackbirds on the rooftop wait:
any one is the snag-turned-

thread I let go of. I've heard
that in winter, all it takes
is one pipe—its slow
frozen crackle. A steady

expanse at the expense
of its container: a pyramidal
shape that contorts and
curtseys, or a pine that is not

harvested early. (*If you do
have a pipe freeze, do not use
an open flame.*) Christmas
tree growers lop female

flowers off to retain shape.
Before the row of swollen
Scotch pine—leader after
leader grew crooked—

this farm's toilet, cradled
in a ditch. Candy pink in the coal-
colored slush. Watch
the garbage truck not take it.

Bad Moon

I see the bad moon arising.

-Credence Clearwater Revival

The habit
of your ring-

tone reminds me
to toss yarrow

stalks, dole
out my lots.

Find a rabbit's
shoulder blades

to watch. You see
earthquakes

and lightning,
but do you know

what the dead
know: the true

number of
moons, their

rivers, our
crows? Herald

of Credence, *pre-*
tend and

portend can often
be confused.

At the Historical Society Spaghetti Dinner,

I meet Lucy, who
elects to document

barns approved
for demolition: photo-

graphs that are keep-
sakes—that's all.

She doesn't enter
a barn to sample

wood cores with fifty
to one-hundred

rings, but leans out her
car window before

the match is lit: *click*:
then tags her photos

with neon post-
its. Her *Gone* is not

a subtle reminder;
the image raises

itself like a rotten
stump. Our district rep-

resentative is serving
pasta; the police

chief is spooning
sauce. I think of the

barn Lucy tells me she
missed: it burned

down while she was
canning peaches.

Strip-Mall Bakery

We're all standing
on black and white checkered

vinyl, over land altered by
glaciers. *In the first*

*stages, so-called break
rollers crack the kernel*

open. The children smudge
a case of assorted

donuts. I spent my
childhood looking at braided

spikelets in rapid
succession. Is it sufficient

to grieve for an image—
not the thing

itself? A field of corn
was impenetrable—

left my own body.

Persimmon

My neighbor is hanging plastic
eggs on trees with colorless

monofilament. She separates
an egg and threads both ends

of the cut line into an air hole
that prevents bursting—

knots the ends, clicks the egg
shut, and transfers the loop

from her hand to a bare branch
of her ornamental sapling as

a jeweler slips a pendant over
the velvet display bust. The egg

is suspended in air. She says
it's for the kids; and I hear *no*

*Christmas lights last year, not
even a blow mold Santa.* Buds

on trees are barely there, but one
egg is the color of a Japanese

persimmon—she thinks its hole
drains her like a relief valve.

Judgment

*Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels
yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in
no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it.*
- 1 Kings 3:26

In Stomer's version
of the judgment

of Solomon
the true

mother looks
stripped

of her in-
fant who's

dangling by his
ankle in the guard's

hand detached
from her

exposed
breast

but don't under-
estimate the other

mother she
held on-

to her dead
son until his

blanket was a
hammock clouding

an untended
garden

The Cutting

To harness it
by distilling

its veins—
Sarah said, *You grow*

lavender
to cut it. We use

you to talk about
people in

general, including
the speaker and

hearer. Like
you can't park

here; or, *why else*
would you grow it?

Round-
backed bees

had opened each
minute lilac-

colored flower,
laid grains in

drawers. *You could*
be making

potpourri, Sarah
told me,

against
the woody center

in a mint.

Raised Bed

Having witnessed
the sudden anonymity

of a mass-planting
of *Rudbeckia hirta*,

I think of the species
of mole with unformed

eyes that keeps a
larder of paralyzed

earthworms for sapped
days: instead of

digging, the *Talpa*
occidentalis pulls one

between its paws
for cleaning, feels

the pipeline empty.

Sprawl

On the train ride
from the city,

we inch
behind houses

without viburnum
hedges

to buffer the view
of the car.

Do the inhabitants
see me *paused*

*for traffic
clearance?*

These wheels
are truncated

cones that span
the track

when it turns.
You can yell

here without your
neighbors

hearing: a possible
force that moves

inert objects.
Riders

on the exit
stairs stack; cattails

whip; the ground
is close.

Union Station

I don't tell the man
waiting for a train

that I'm not a poet-
watchdog, just like

the sixties. Is there a
dog that doesn't

howl, keeps your
lounge chair warm

for you? I'm nodding
though I disagree

with the man—
there really are poets

better than Ginsberg—
who gestures with palm

upturned, pitched
forward, mouth eagerly

moving. Behind us,
the drunks on lunch

hour are rowdy
at the crowded bar.

To our right, a home-
less woman weaves

between tables, swivels
her head like a line-

backer, anticipating
eye contact.

The Caretaker

She was taught to put his oxygen mask on first. So instead of practicing yoga on a Saturday, she picks him up from the group home, bathes him, shaves him, gives him a haircut, takes him to his routine psychiatrist appointment and gets his lab work done. They bowl a few rounds if he cooperates when she scours him like a pot. But when she returns

him like a rented tux, she's reminded of who he is every other day of the week: just another resident who's stayed home on a Saturday, crowding the front door for a glimpse of the luminary approaching.

Coeur à la Crème

I stumbled upon
a stranger's blog
this photo of the soft-

set ricotta heart
plated with tea-
spoonfuls of rasp-

berry sauce she
holds her face
close to the plate

expecting no small
group for dinner
but a deluge

of chalked fingers
they mother her
a quiet sieve

the spray of primo-
cane bruised
ruddy at the pith

Equinox

A boy collapses on the lawn, rolls
over, grows damp, can gauge
clouds above him, draws
finger shapes. The mole slowly

backs out of its tunnel. The boy
pierces the air like a dorsal fin.
Bring me the trowel, I hear
myself speak. Instead, his hands

cup the yellow confetti that fell
with the first hard rain. Poise and
counterpoise: the forsythia is
green. The lowest hanging branch

took root, second windpipe, ripe
for a cutting. Or so my mother says.

In Wind

Drifts of snow ceaselessly crossing the road
are a shadowy consistency, the day's transience,

or what the plow scraped away before it blew right back.
Moving pictures are never scenic. At the wheel,

you reopen panic: a covered road, what it feels like
to be open-road spinning. So you fit the missing

half-moon into its proper place. Listeners to the half-
hearted know that they, too, can never choose

to face—is this what it's like to have nothing between
you and the wind? To sew your sinking ship,

torque your tertial feather? That kind of snow knows
nothing of the quill, the pen, the sojourner's late

return. You packed your summertime preserves
with haste—so crack them, crack them like eggs.

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