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Boy Heroic: When the Wound Becomes Form

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Abstract: This work combines a brief theoretical introduction, a long-form poem, and a reflective essay to explore the intersections of ethnography, poetic form, and the performance of masculinity. The poem, "Minnesota Odyssey," is written in iambic pentameter and centers on a young boy's navigation of violence, vulnerability, and familial roles within a working-class context. Framed as both an ethnographic witness and an actor in an unheroic epic, the boy becomes a figure through which to explore how formal poetic constraints, especially meter, echo the social constraints that shape gendered becoming. Drawing from autotheory and performance studies—traditions that treat lived experience as a site of inquiry and embodiment as its medium—this work advances an approach to ethnographic poetics that treats form as method rather than ornament. The accompanying essay situates the piece within anthropological and poetic traditions, from Dell Hymes' ethnopoetics to Renato Rosaldo's "verse with an ethnographic sensibility," while advancing an argument for rhythm and failure as modes of embodied critique. Together, the poem and essay stage a performance of containment, dissonance, and the difficulty of making meaning from within a collapsing mythos.

Fieldwork is scary and exhilarating because the body becomes the conduit through which the raw feelings of life are imprinted and recorded. Fieldnotes and ethnographic writing are the traces of what has happened to the body, but it is the body that must live with what it has absorbed: what shaped it, what it is now responsible to, and what it cannot return from. Living this way splits the

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self in real time, so that one part stays while another part withdraws. The performance isn't what we *do* after the fact—it is the split itself.

My dissertation fieldwork in Barcelona made a wound I had been carrying impossible to ignore. I could not process the wound there because anthropology still does not know how to hold a wounded researcher. What anthropology refused to hold, my body was forced to carry. While fieldwork demands vulnerability, academia demands legibility and composure, and there was nowhere for the trembling to go, so it ate away at me, waiting. Poetry was already a part of my life, but during fieldwork it changed registers; the trembling moved there because there was nowhere else for it to live. What surfaced was not analysis but memory. I still do not fully understand why it pulled me back to Minneapolis, where I grew up, but it is where I could still imagine being held, where play had not yet been replaced by composure. The poem is the holding environment that anthropology failed to provide.

It is from this need for a place to exist without performing that *Minnesota Odyssey* begins:

Minnesota Odyssey

and Mom! Then Lyndale bowed
Like a snowglobe's road! He said to *save some room*
For dinner now. It didn't even matter
my hands were numb—not cold! So I
Couldn't get the package open again.
The cinnamon rolls? Salvation Army ones.
And cause he knew we fight a lot, in the pickup
Bed he built us each a separate bucket seat
From parts he'd loaned from Lonny's yardcar.
Safe? Of course. I saw the bolts he used
To hold them down. The rusty—yea, reused!—
The bolts he took from bikes he'd fixed

The other day. He said he'd fix our drain!

Then Larry tried to get across the bed
To grab the cinnamon rolls from me but Ron
Accelerated going *Hold on!* So Larry held
The car seatbelt across his lap because
It'd broke, then *hold on lest you go shaken out*
like salt, on the pavement. And Mom
The intersection looked like a Christmas tree.
They fixed the Camden theater sign so now
The bulbs but one are on. The stoplights
Looked like ornaments. Green. Red. GreenGo!
He said he lost his job, so he's around
A lot. Mom. You should marry him.

Then puffs of clouds from other cars' exhaust
Were everywhere. Blast through, the sky was blue
Like lakes up north. And Mom, he's good at songs.
He sang us one to help us cross the bridge.
The river? Ice, was com *pletely* frozen over.
Yea! I could hear them both always. The cab's
Back window, stuck open. *Hold your breath!*
He said to see if we could make it all
The way across the bridge. We tried. He sang:

One Mississippi, the ice looks slippery.
Three Mississippi, you're bliss as hippies.
Five Mississippi, would you grip me?
Seven Mississippi, no, little sissy.

Nine Mississippi, feeling tipsy.
—Larry poked my stomach. Cheater. *Knock*
It off, he yelled, *or else no Witch's Hat,*
The highest place in Minneapolis. He drove
Us there. The Witch's Hat, Mom, just listen
Used to be a water tower overlooking
The old Anthony Falls where did they go?
The sun looks like a glowing basketball.
The skyscrapers like fingers clutching it.
Our house's: over there. Basilica,
The very tippy top of St. Paul.
Mom, he knows so much, you should marry him.

We joked a lot: *don't tell your, mother this…*
Like once we played this game. *Unbuckle your belts*
He said like the Terminator *lie down face up*
On the corrugated floor of the bed. He drove us
Really fast under bridges that almost
Touched the cab's top and we got so scared
By them because we never knew when they'd come.

He kept saying *boys!* to point things out.
We did eat, earlier. McDonald's—he called
It Mickey D's. We almost went to White Castle
But they were closed. Did you know about
The burgers' size?—I want to tell.
Let me tell it.
But, Mommy. I'm already telling it.

If Larry gets to finish telling it
Then I should get to tell more later on.
He took us to St. Paul all the
Way. Because he said that
We could see the giant heads at
Minn e so ta Histori cal So ci e ty.
The parking lot snow snow!
—But he tells the story so slow, Mom!
In
Well, in the parking lot!
There was three big people on signs
Ron said it was for—historical enactments
Yes for historical
One head was a doctor giving people shots.
Pecisillian
Two guys in puffy coats, on the moon jump! Jump!
People, light and smiles like this
The Edison lightbulb inventing workshop, Mom.
Yes. They were really big. —
The exhibit was called *Great American Accomplishments*.
We didn't go because we were going sledding.
He made us laugh because he took his hand—
But Larry's done with telling. Right, Larry? Yes.
We drove away, Mom, and while we did
And boys, you've heard of what they're building next?
He drove pretending to us from the front of the cab.
He was stuffing whole the burgers in his mouth.
He said at White Castle you order them

So small they fit in whole in a mouth
That *soon they too would appear on the signs*
with the other great American accomplishments
at the Minnesota Historical Society.
We got to go to White Castle—Mom
It's so cool! We got to go through the drive through.
He called the box you talk to the *talkbox*.
He said *hi hello, twenty burgers, please.*
And inside folded over a burger whole
And stuffed all of it inside his mouth
Then showed us how to *sop* the fries in clumps
In ketchup and then some red was stuck to his chin.
Mom, yes, he'll really come for dinner now.

||

Bumping my butt, the potholes along Lyndale
From Folwell to Jordan then worldly Broadway;
McDonald's, liquor stores we pass the Victorians;
I see them as families all broke into rentals
That reach toward each other across property lines.

||

As if he were all of the men who lugged

Stone slabs up ramps they used to make
The pyramids, he hauls my lone big bro
And I with rope attached to fanglike holes
He's drilled into the toboggan's underbitten jaw.
He gives big bro his old, oiled buckskin
Choppers; I get the inner mitts
His hands have warmed for me. I see
Him look ahead up hill into the wind
As cold as can no longer be and fold,
Like boiled hotdogs, his cold-swole fingers
Into his chore coat's tan cuffs.

||

Next door's strip mall and two-dollar theater
Where Steven Seagal in *Glimmer Man* we watch
Him hunt for vigilante justice, the wrongs
Of which us boys so long ago forgot.
He pulls a shadow, Home Depot stick
Licorice, from inside his coat and passes
A stick to me, without interrupting
The dance of light on his face.
The candy's sweet chemical numb;
Comfort found asking for more.

Returning to the screen, I see Glimmer Man

Is beating up a circle of men, his beaming
Punches, kicks break through bad guys like a lighthouse light.
Please, no, the last conscious bad guy pleads.
Zoom in, a close up of a silver Glock
That the Glimmer Man pulls from his suit.
He whispers to me, do you see how he shot
The bad guy just now in the kneecap. That was smart.
This way, he can keep him, hurt but talking.
Final scene: the Glimmer Man kicks a bad guy
In the chest through an exploding stain glass window.
In the final scene, the bad guy hangs
By his eye and wrists from an iron fence
Like how I imagine Jesus on the Cross.

||

Hey bud, you want some of this? He says provoking
Us to play fight with him inside the space
Between parked cars. *Palm strike chin—wah pow!*
Elbow to temple—hiya! Too fast to be
A butterfly, he quick unfolds the knife
He keeps inside among his credit cards.
In flashing light he moves the blade before
Our eyes like schooling fish. *Run the sharp*
Edge along the Adam's apples until blood
Comes spilling out the wound—remember how on the news

We saw the guard plied sandbags but water kept pouring over?
Like that. He mimes a man grasping to where
His words had vibrated and drops onto
The ground. He lays there googly eyed, splayed.
I like to think that I need to know all of this.
The Glimmer Man also keeps a blade handy.
Maybe I should too.

Ghost in the Form: The Other Other of Ethnographic Poetry

The poem is not proof or argument, it is a trace of the encounter between my body and my fieldwork in Barcelona. Rather than interpreting or explaining the poem, I want to create an analytic container in which it can live. To do that, I turn to the lineage of ethnopoetics and the question of what form can hold.

Within anthropology, interest in poetry has largely taken two forms. First, there are anthropologists such as Dell Hymes who have studied culturally specific poetics, such as oral storytelling, folklore, and written forms, what he called "ethnopoetics" (2003). This first approach *studies* poetic techniques *as they appear in social specificity*. The second approach, is that of ethnographic poets, such Renato Rosaldo, who write poetry themselves, what Rosaldo called "anthropoetry." This second approach is often referred to more broadly as ethnographic poetry, or as Rosaldo put it, "verse with an ethnographic sensibility" (2014), and it focuses on the thick description of lived cultural experience through poetic form. My poetry follows Rosaldo's approach, but returns to the wound beneath the field site—the older wound that the field made impossible to ignore.

The question for me is not just *what* the poem witnesses, but *what form can hold that witnessing*. I did not set out to write a poem in iambic pentameter; it was simply the rhythm that I was drawn to, something that felt like it could contain the rhythms and desires of boyhood: a longing for form, mastery, and the illusion of control. When dealing with deep feeling, formal constraints are liberating because they allowed me to sing and be free within something that feels eternal and limited.

While recent work in anthropology has embraced the creative turn in anthropological knowledge production (Borpujari et al. 2024; Pandian & McLean 2017), most discussions around ethnographic poetry emphasize *what* the poem describes—the cultural, social, and affective content—rather than *how* it's told. In other words, there has been more attention to ethnographic content than to poetic craft. And while many ethnographic poems use lyricism, imagery, or thick description, few attend to rhythm and meter. That neglect is in line with wider trends in contemporary poetry, where formal constraints, like meter, are seen by many as outdated, elitist, or overly academic.

Yet meter, especially in its historical associations with epic poetry, is deeply political. Mastery of metrical forms, particularly in English, was often a marker of class privilege and racialized literacy. Knowing the canon meant having access to it. Still, some contemporary poets have turned back to those canonical forms, such as the sonnet, villanelle, sestina, not to uphold them, but to break them open, to test their limits, to ask what can and cannot be said within them.

That is the terrain where Minnesota Odyssey operates. I wrote the poem in iambic pentameter, in a form associated with epic poetry in the West: Shakespeare, Milton, and in longer cadences, Homer. I started writing in dactylic hexameter, the meter of The Odyssey, but found, like many poets before me, that dactylic hexameter did not fit the musicality of my maternal and working-class-inflected language. Iambic pentameter, on the other hand, felt more natural, more musical in English. More like the way a ten-year-old boy might think if he were trying to sound mythic while still thinking in burgers and Hollywood films.

The boy in this poem is not a hero. Not in any grand, Odyssean sense. He is just a kid, thrown into situations bigger than him, like so many boys are. And unlike in the classic hero's journey, there is no triumph at the end. There is survival. There is confusion. There is witnessing. The boy describes more than he understands. He notices. He mimics. He performs.

I chose the meter to give the poem a song-like rhythm because the speaker of the poem (a child), is not analyzing the world. He is living in it. As Mark Doty notes in *The Art of Description* (2010), poetic form is not merely a vehicle for representing reality, it is a way of transmitting the *experience* of perception itself. For the boy in Minnesota Odyssey, rhythm and sound allow him to *feel* the world before he can name it. The poem does not explain his reality; it moves through it.

In that sense, the poem is a performance. A performance of gender. Of class. Of the everyday spectacle of violence that does not always erupt, but saturates the atmosphere. It is a performance of containment, but in the way that emotion

is metabolized, then leaks out through the pores. Like the beat of a line that almost hits the meter, but not quite.

To be a boy is often to be caught in this weird dance between being acted upon and performing. You do not always know what you are feeling; you only know what you are supposed to do. So you stage it. You mimic what you think power looks like. You throw a punch, or you flinch. Or you watch your brother do it first. The boy in this poem does not judge; he absorbs. He records. He performs his role without yet knowing he has been cast in one.

This is why, for me, the poem is ethnographic. Not because it explains, but because it witnesses (Stevenson 2014). Because it listens. Because it performs a struggle with language and form that mirrors the struggle of growing up inside the noisy, collapsing myths of masculinity, family, and survival.

Sometimes form fails. Ben Lerner writes that every poem is "a record of failure," because the desire for perfect expression is always thwarted by the limitations of language. But for Lerner, this failure is not a flaw; it is what gives poetry its critical force. In *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016), he argues that poetry's impossibility is precisely what makes it a space for imaginative and ethical possibility. My use of iambic pentameter, then, is not a mastery of form but a wrestling with it—an acknowledgment of both its promise and its insufficiency.

In that failure, that friction, is where something else starts to happen. That is the space I am writing from. Poetry does not supplement ethnography, but it reveals the part of ethnographic reality that cannot be held by its usual methods. It is where method and self blur, where autotheory names not as a confession but as a form of thinking and relation. It is the remainder that must become form in order to survive.

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