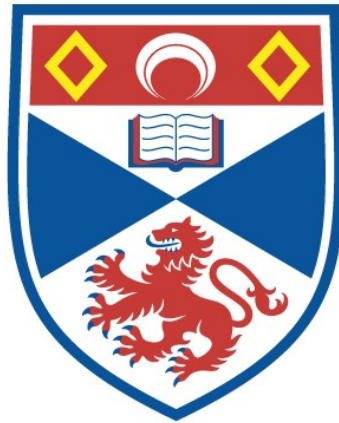


The meetinghouse

Daniel Paul Rattelle

A thesis submitted for the degree of MFA
at the
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Prologue to the Meetinghouse

Could you believe – here –
in this blank
unstained windowlight?

Aubade

Portland, ME

After the wedding, before the toasts were over,
because we knew we'd be who-knows-how-long,

we walked all night. Classic New England weather –
hot that day, by then we were shivering.

Beyond the baseball field, we found a trail
that weaved behind the houses. New-tapped kegs

were hissing, horseshoes clattered, someone yelled.
But further out and up, nothing but treefrogs.

There are fifty-seven working lighthouses in Maine
which is fewer than you'd imagine for all that coast.

Postcard: Glasgow Necropolis

What could be more Victorian than this?
A picnic lunch,
The two of us walk the Necropolis
In search of famous dead. You had a hunch
We'd come up empty. Bruce and Burns and Hume,
Of course, were elsewhere, from another age.
Here's where the 19th Century is laid.
Those dark industrial lords have founded tomb
By tomb their city of the dead. Their wage,
Bequeathed to us as romance, fully paid.

Cul-De-Sac

For days it was the B side to *Veedon Fleece*.
Unflipped it gathered dust. You blew it clean
then set the record spinning, needle-in-groove,
bewildered in the comfort of the thing.

I loved the jacket. The out-of-place-ness of it:
an awkward idyll, faux Edwardian
in its coloured-over black and white effect,
familiar and strange on even keel.

I've been there in that leaving, too. I've known
the sting of coming back across my hand,
walked concentric circles of lonely stone
and doubled back, not getting there from here.

Canada Geese

out here our voices don't carry
but when geese go south
it sounds like echoes

of old joy growing older still
they carry the weather
from quebec and leave it behind

with last year's feathers
they form and scatter
lucky birds

the same air that froze
the words to my mouth
holds them like a breath

Cellar Shelf

It is what it is— a couple sheets
of plywood braced to the wall,
two flats of tall boys, a bag of rice,
the glint of pickle jars. A bucket
of carrots packed in sand, an old
pot & a box of nails.

The Joy of Cooking

Go early and check the snares you set the night before. The hare might still be warm. Hook it by its back paws and let it hang until the light goes from its eyes and bits fall off at a touch. It's ready then. Have a bucketful of water handy. It's best to work outside. Cut off the head, scoop out the brain but save the rest. Make sure your knives are sharp then cut across the belly. Don't push too hard or else you'll pierce the stomach and the whole thing will have been a waste. Peel back the skin like a slipper. Burn the offal. Fill the hollow body with aromatics. Shallots, carrots, fennel and celery then rub it all over with butter and herbs. A good rule of thumb is: flavor the animal with what it would have eaten. Parsley, sage, chervil, savory, alfalfa. Whatever you can take to hand. There won't be too much meat so serve with lots of rice or potatoes. The sauce should be muted, mostly drippings from the bottom of the pan. Deglaze with cider. Make soup stock from the bones. Fill the skull with compost. Bury it in the exact center of your garden.

The Joy of Cooking II

The next thing you'll want to learn to do is how to make cheese, although you know it isn't really making. It's like this: when a man went out to work, he filled a goat's stomach full of that morning's milking and tied it shut. When the sun was hot, he found some shade and loosed the stomach and found the milk had thickened and tasted good with figs. The goat had given everything already, the man's clothes for one, and years of milk until she grew too old. That's when he cut her throat with a sharpened stone and ate what he could. The milk she carried in her stomach that day probably belonged to her daughter's daughter, and it seemed there was enough of her left alive to turn it over.

The Joy of Cooking III

Deemed *unfit for human consumption* by the FDA, most of us will have to settle for a can of spicy liver, speckled with oats in place of haggis. But if, like me, you're lucky enough to live in a place where you can be on speaking terms with shepherds, one of them can hook you up. The old adage says you don't want to know how the sausage is made. But you want to know how the sausage is made. I'll make it simple for you. A couple rinses of the stomach are in order. Some folk let it rest a night in buttermilk. Sanitize your countertop then grind the heart, the lungs, and the liver together. Cayenne. Mustard. Salt. Toast the oats. Stuff it in the stomach. Prick it all over with a fork so it doesn't explode then poach the better part of the afternoon. And in its steam you'll breathe the same air as the sheep. Develop a taste for grass. Bleat. Become, at heart, a sheep, your wolf-suit notwithstanding.

Postcard: the Swans at the Royal Botanic Gardens

'But are they sad?' I overheard her say.
No more than five
Up North with mum for the August bank holiday.
I saw what she meant. They hardly seemed alive
Compared with, overhead, the flock of geese
That flew with everything they had toward France
Or Spain. All of a sudden, all eyes went skyward.
But if the swans were jealous, they held their peace.
I bet they knew, by then, they'd had their chance.
Homesick, maybe. Sad? That wasn't *my* word.

Michaelmas

for Brandon, after an old wives' tale

The day the devil took a tumble and pissed on the pricker bush
to curse
the fallen world he'd fallen into,
everything withers for good intentions, like berries
on the vine.

Still, each year we pick them and make them into jam
to spite the bastard.

Oar

Fishing-drunk in the Connecticut
and no miraculous catch, you row for home.

What short thrusts from stern
to bow you give

are given back in long strides across the water.
You leverage the world

which looks to be the thing that moves
while the boat holds still.

Back and forth you heave the oars
like the sawyer in a cuckoo clock

and it was getting late. And I was afraid
that you would be held there

better than the cleat hitch
you swore would never slip.

Painting Over the Growth Chart

I had to squint to notice them. The lines
that bicker up to door jamb in the kitchen—

a notch for every year, or half-a-year,
depending on how much the kids had grown.

A coat of paint is all it takes and if
it's not like new, it's good enough for now.

Any sign they ever lived here is blotted out
except, perhaps, in Poloroids, stashed

in someone's attic with the bric-a-brac
they couldn't bring themselves to throw away—

all crew cuts and towel-capes on summer break
circa ninety-nine. But now those kids

are just like me. Beer gut and greys in the drain—
fit for this life and mortgaged into it.

Distiller

I know enough to know
good spirit. I hear
the warble in the swan neck,

the rhythm of the washback,
the unlooked-for music of oak.
I split and stack and stoke.

I keep time to the chug
of copper tubing like a two-step.
I wait the process out.

I hoop together staves
to gather drop by drop
like rain the living water.

Abraham on Mount Moriah

Genesis 14

Laughter was his name,
I'll say, when asked

or else I'll simply
wash him away

like so much semen
running down the leg.

I'll take comfort
when it comes and sleep,

even, in sheets
away from this

wanderlust.
Call me Abram.

I'll strike my tent
and go back to Ur.

I'll leave the stars
to count themselves.

Outhouse Blues

Early morning stool/ is it's best/ through two feet of snow/ when
the shitter smells/ like nothing/ but it's own hewn beams.// Hitch
open the door/ with a rope/ and the sun blankets/ your knees and
thighs./ Be naked/ beneath your sweater.

Never mind the bleached/ skeleton/ behind the cabin./It has been
eaten/ and again/ turned to you-know-what.//Mushrooms look
like dicks—/ yes, of course./ but have you noticed/ the lady
slipper?/ Its twin lips,/ shelter for the bee?/

You have me singing, /Solomon/ you one-hit wonder. //

Indigestible,/ apple seeds/ scatter through deershit./ Indigestible/
to humans/ weird apples flourish.

-Woolman Hill, Deerfield, MA

Juniper,

not evergreen,
its waxen leaves
can handle even

New England weather.
Each is a species
of place, refracted
as if through green glass
or puddle water.

Here— roots clutch
gravel with all
their courage.

There— the sea air
bottlenecks
like drops of color
on plain paper.

But then again
you ought to know.

for and after Dan Drage

Postcard: Bluesman, Glasgow

With brand name trainers and a thrift store jumper,
A basement bar
And double whisky neat, he plays a number
Whose name I can't remember, tunes his guitar
Then takes another. An opening act for sure
But then I wonder. Now, near ten years spent,
Is he still up there, moaning soulful slow -
Smooth baritone gone gravelly thirty-four,
Whose nine-to-five is just to pay the rent?
Would that. Here's hoping. I can't hear him though.

Poem with Clash lyrics and Zen proverbs

I get violent when I'm fucked up.
I get it. What of it?

Sober I'm no better,
seeing how a good horse runs

at the shadow of a whip,
& I stand knock-kneed

in the stall
shuddering

beneath the lantern light
of no-desire &

I don't know
what can be done about it

Believer's Baptism

Chesterfield, MA

Hip deep, you waited in the river,
 testified by those who've known you
from girlhood. We waited too, speaking shape-notes over you,
sweet as honey from the lion's skull or the sound of amazing grace.
But underwater
nobody could follow you
 and you and everybody
held their breath. And just like that the grave was scooped away,
 the water still trickling like blood down your thigh.

In a Puritan Churchyard

for and after Emily Dickinson

The youngest grave is Union dead;
I can just make out the stone.
The sign says *if I have not love* –
The rest of it is gone –

All Souls
1957-2017

October is out of breath
as yours left you.

Mine hangs around
like leaves in the branches

of another November.
Birches stretch and fall

like living ghosts.
They rot from the heart

and leave behind
their husk of bark.

And when I get home
and take off my coat

and hang it in the closet,
I don't mean to speak

of any greater hope
than what I have.

Ode

For Bob & Gabriella

Tonight, without sound,
the crocus
unfolds through old snow.

A slow hope: the bloom
like banked coals
holds out till morning.

The Commonwealth

Cummington, MA

They burned the house
and searched the coals for nails.

Now all that's left
is this foundation stone

storing up the heat
for when it fails

like the snake who thinks
the sunlight is his own.

Riff on Horace

i.14 'the ship of state'

Oh, little skiff you're out beyond your depth.
We saw this coming. What now? Come home!

Your sail's in tatters as if it were made of paper
and oars won't be much help now anyway.

Soon enough your hull will give and then:
All hands to Davy Jones! To think how proud

we were to watch you sail, scoured and shiny
as a lucky penny. They even called you *Lincoln*.

Not that now it's any consolation.
If I were a praying man, I'd pray for you.

Rocking Chair

*Come life, Shaker life, come life eternal
shake, shake out of me all that is carnal -Shaker Hymn*

From bowed rails
to runged seat of shingle-split timber
it's woven like the rug it rocks on.

A thick switch of maple
hooked in place forms the arm,
the brackets at the back.

Varnished with tar, it shines
like borrowed light from a fire
turned against itself,

dim coals collapsing
going inward, impotent,
so simple and settled-in.

Doug's Ordination Song

Could you believe that in a single day I stood in the cave of a famous hermit and later, on the spot where a protestant martyr was burned alive? And I thought how the smoke and ash must have blown like incense over the town by the same North Sea wind that stoked white the flame and burned until all that was left of him was a pocketful of teeth. Each indifferent wave crested and fell over the scene as they did for the monks of St Columba who lay on their backs in boats made of twisted hazel and deerhide, sealed with tar, whose lungs filled with saltwater, who rose and fell, abandoned to providence, and blessed every wave. Some made it to Iceland. And, they say, one lucky monk made it all the way to Massachusetts. He lived and set up shop in a cave in Shutesbury. Right on your doorstep. Can you believe it?

Nostalgia

from an old photograph

He cuts a clean, mid-century silhouette
and leans against the late rococo urn
with skinny tie and just-so cigarette.
It's not quite sepia. A slow burn.

Back home, he'll serve his neighbors rye Manhattans.
A couple rounds of bridge complete the scene –
Midwestern, hours behind. Though photos flatten,
iron over if and maybe, might-have-been,

the queuing up, the waiting for the train,
we take them, take them for the real thing.
Vienna, Rome, Madrid, Alsace-Lorraine –
at least it isn't here, the familiar sting,

the ache that comes with coming home. He's seen
the negative, queues up vacation shots
and casts his life against a blank white screen.
Still life with porcelain vase, forget-me-nots.

Proofing Basket

A twist of willow
dusted with flour trucked in
from somewhere else
and an old table. Old hands.
A little leaven.

Each lump cut from the same batch
and placed on the scale, tared
with metric counterweights
as if anything more than daily bread
hung in the balance.

Little House on the Prairie

In light of the fact that Ma's favorite hymn
was called 'There is a Happy Land', you could excuse
the catch in my throat the other night when I read
the part when the dog gets swept away, fording the Missouri.
(yes, I know, he'll come back, faithful Jack, but might that
not have been a trick of memory? One dog looks much
like another, fifty years later.) Even Laura couldn't bring
herself to tell us about the morning Mary woke up blind,
How the light must have filled the room as usual.
It starts, in epic poise, in *medias res*. But then, it's only middle,
like the rest of us. We never see the end. We're left
behind with the dead boy and the burned house in South Dakota.
The story doesn't shut but like a picket-gate in heavy wind
that slams against the jamb and doesn't latch.

The View from the French King Bridge

If nothing else, the view is lovely – two hills
like arms wrapped around the Connecticut
so high that distance doesn't matter anymore.
Its art deco rails are easy enough to climb.
They'll wonder how they built it someday,
when all the little Route 2 towns are empty.
The better question would be why. No one
takes that road to Boston anymore, except
retirees on Sunday drives or misers trying
to skip the tolls. Of them all, just four are said
to have survived. Total deaths unknown.
Even if I'll never have the nerve to stop
the car and walk its length for fear
that passersby would slow, then
think they'd better mind their own business
and drive away, to wherever it is they're headed,
then check the local papers in the morning,
just to see, I'd like to. There, I said it.

American Robin

Hey Sam, I thought you'd like to know
I saw a robin today. The first.

And I remembered how on our last walk
on the coast of the North Sea, you said

the proper robin is small, no bigger
than a golf ball. Ours is a thrush,

a family of songsters second only
to the nightingale. You might know,

I don't. But under a streetlamp
on a rainy Tuesday before work,

before daylight, in time
that's free and unaccounted for, I think I hear it.

Greenfield

(1985-2015)

I was at a loss for once
when they found you like a monk at prayer –
head shorn and pressed against

the driver's side, a decade
of penny-colored bruises
up your arm, the engine

cold. And if I swam
from one side to the other
beneath the overpass

and stuck a folded dollar
on your tongue, still
the bargeman wouldn't come,

he wouldn't bother. Here,
the ground is stiff. We leave
our dead until the thaw.

They burned you, though,
a rosary around your arm.
And when your year's mind came,

they scooped a tablespoon
of ashes and set them in
a wishing lamp, your photo

stapled to the paper.

And as it cleared the trees,
everyone held their breath.

Pilgrim Way

Since noon had failed
to clear the willow tree,
frost took to the hillside

like static between
frequencies, accident
without essence.

Baker

for Jonathan Stevens

Darkly now the oven
stoked and smoking—smells
adrift—a morning risen

like a hungry ghost. All day
the rasp of plank on stone,
the weight of loaves unzipped

like salmon skin. You stretch
beyond the oven's lip
to reach the deepest loaf.

Nestled in your glove,
you tap the crust for the sound
like someone knocking.

Georgic

Remember that April
when the sledge, cabled
to the plow-truck,
hauled what unexpected snow
had felled to be split
and seasoned and sold
against some other winter?

Thoreau says cordwood
heats us twice, once
in harvest, once in hearth.
I call bullshit.
What are trees but sunlight
under the accidents
of grain and needle?

Besom

Bound-up straw and whittled birch –
they only ever hung their brooms
to rest on Sunday after church
and sat in sun-swept living rooms.

An heirloom? No. Too commonsense.
Too thrifty, though, to throw it away.
They left it. It's been here ever since.
As if it's been one long Sabbath-day.

Postcard: A Bar in Stirling

It's breakfast time. A pint goes nicely down
for ten AM.

It's foggy like I like and russet brown.

The bacon, eggs and pudding too, I liked them.

But did it rain that day? I can't decide.

And neither can I say what dress you wore,

Nor yet the joke you told me on the train.

What odds that now as then we're side by side
in bed as barstool, asking nothing more?

On second thought, yes thanks, the same again.

Evensong

What saint was it who said
that when we sing

our prayer repeats itself—
its substance resounds

in vowels that lengthen like shadows
in the throats of hermits

who at night could fill my abandoned
barn of a soul

with the empty space in their howling
Salve Reginas?

Epilogue: American Sentence

Long distance truck-side
graffiti
reads 'believe the dream'