

# ON MICHAEL CROSS

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The first of the two epigraphs that introduce Michael Cross's most recently published poem, *Throne* (Dos Press, 2007), comes from Jack Spicer and, I think, appropriately gestures toward the kinds of concerns that make Michael's growing body of work an important counter to our new century's well-guarded (if poorly funded) sense of what poetry, counter-progressively, has come to announce. Michael wants us to hear Spicer's invocation of the absolute as both an invitation and a warning: "Once you try to embrace an absolute geometric circle the naked loss stays with you like a picture echoing." These figures (circularity, geometry, nudity, loss, echo) are at the root of what *Throne*, in its pulling away, drones to presence. The geometry of Spicer's baseball diamond, the nudity of Duncan's law, and the angled perfection of Lorca and Hemingway's bullfighters, dancing ever close to danger's source, seem appropriate leads for the detective work the poem demands. What I mean is that *Throne's* danger is also its delicacy, a brazen fusion of the object's hardest rule (law's absolute) and an enacted romantic sense of necessity, that of evacuating one's literality into the poem. This is critical, working-class expressionism, the brutality inherent in making oneself an object for writing belonging to an absolute, or tending at least to go off like an IED, sharding what the work is not. Thus *thetic*, *Throne's* first movement, blends idioms of readerly intimacy, the last line's "*bon mot*," with street-talk in the sun. Here's an example of law's sensuality:

draw paren to the sun brand  
as to sun I tell this guy  
in water in water, bottlenecks the dynast's  
hand, by bore flayed boxwood  
lip to lave by lawmen's banded eyes  
bunches in the hand the same as me  
poised upon the polished fats a wedge

Is there water in water? After polishing fats, is it time to eat? Circling in upon these questions (whether or not the lawman's hand will ever free itself from the neck of the bottle, how the poet becomes like that lawman, bunched and blind yet graceful) would seem a primary element of the thinking by which these movements must be crossed. The demand inherent in Cross's work is, I think, to stand at its center, to *be*, in a sense, that center, and

to keep looking around, trying on the poem's costumed diction to see how it fits. The poem wears a hood, and it fits strangely. Following *thetic*, the poem's second movement, *sarx/pneuma*, fills a bad neighborhood with "sea-foam," enacting a scene in which the poet, drawn to images of self-defense and incarceration, wears his hoodie backwards, facing its seam:

to vetting folks  
I seen at the carwash  
iterant's catch at the choke  
for pleathers thins in white  
rims the place one wants a world for  
sacerdotally, at least, the seam  
in the hood I face

Do these rims keep spinning? It is not enough to note the distance, one Cross repeatedly cultivates, between street-level and ivory tower discourses and dictions (*sacerdotally*, *anomos*, *vulpine* captivating a poetic space in which *pleather* and a *carwash* will also figure) as ironic. We are not here being treated to yet another experiment in the now exhausted, and usually reconciliatory, staged crash between entrenched vocabularies. Rather, romantically, we are faced with a strangeness more genuine, a necessary homelessness by which the objects one confronts come to composition such that, in speaking them, we record the suffering to which Spicer's epigram alludes. Tending toward absolution, one finds that one's vehicle, the available vehicles, are filthy. Responsive to *Throne's* imposed force, a black geometry made delicate, one faces "the subject's front to come," a temporality by whose law dead things desire commerce with the living. What Cross's work forces me to realize, as at the opening of *Throne's* final movement, *nunc age*, is that, in the poem's midst, I have eaten "what feeds me to ashes."