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College of Humanities and Sciences
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by John Gunther Hoppenthaler entitled Marco Polo has been approved by his committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Marco Polo

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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- * This symbol is used to indicate a space between sections or stanzas of a poem whenever such spaces are lost in pagination.

Table of Contents

SECTION I: Marco Polo	1
QUEENS	2
MARCO POLO	3
WILDROSES	5
STRUCTURE FISHING	8
SUPPLICATION	9
GRANDFATHER'S CIGAR	11
CLEANING THE GUTTERS BAREHANDED	12
TWO EVENINGS	13
BLEEKER & MCDOUGAL	16
DOODLETOWN	18
DAYDREAM WHILE FISHING ON THE HUDSON	20
SECTION II: The Full-Moonlight We Came For	22
POEM	23
RESTSTOP OFF THE PALISADES PARKWAY	24
POINT PLEASANT WEEKEND	25
RUNNING	26
WOLVERINE	27
POEM FOR KELLY	28
BEACH	29
THE COUPLE	31
LOVE POEM IN TWO PARTS	32

READING SALINGER BY CANDLELIGHT	34
SECTION III: Faith	36
THE CIRCLE CLOSES TIGHTER	37
LEAVING BAKERSFIELD AND TWO GOOD FRIENDS I HADN'T SEEN FOR THREE YEARS	38
A POEM FOR FRIENDS	39
AN INEXPENSIVE VACATION	40
A PUBLIC GESTURE	41
FAITH	42
IN THE STORM	44
EIRE	45
LATE SHIFT	46
COURTSIDE	47
DUCK'S POEM	48
DIGGING IT ON PIER 84	49
BREEZY SUMMER MORNING	50
LAKE DEFOREST 8/3/82	51
THE GRASS	52

MARCO POLO

QUEENS

I was five when we left,
two months after a lady up the block
got stabbed 114 times.
I sat on the stoops with a waterpistol,
wearing an old white towel
safety-pinned around my neck.
I didn't know Superman didn't use a gun,
and didn't need a plastic pail of ammo
next to him on the steps.

When my father went down
to the basement, he'd take me along.
It was divided into chicken-wire sections,
crowded with studded snow tires,
old clothes and cardboard boxes sealed with tape.
I wanted to get in,
but they were padlocked, and my father
was always ready to go back upstairs, 8 floors,
and I had to follow.

Outside my bedroom window,
a drop, sheer to the alley.
The next building jammed so close alongside,
there was hardly space for the sun to shine,
or for a body to fall down in.

MARCO POLO

The swimming pool
was the center of muggy days.
"Get out,
you'll turn into a prune,"
slipped off our baby-oiled backs
like water.

When it was my turn.
I would shut my eyes tight,
duck under water, spin three times,
and leap up yelling

MARCO.

ready to lunge
at the nearest return of
POLO.

Underwater,
escaping limbs
sounded unearthly and tempting,
the laughs above,
the taunts, reassuring me
I wasn't alone,
but temporarily separate.

Eyes closed,
I'm in that world again,

just missing the touch
of slippery legs and arms,
just out of reach.

WILDROSES

For Bill Heyen

The house across the street was empty
as the cracked turtle's shell
I found in the rock-filled brook
that ran into the hidden pond
on the overgrown property
where I'd fish off a low dam
for catfish, carp, and blue-gills.
The deserted building had been ransacked,
and as years passed, fewer things remained,
fewer bearings by which to examine
the lives that were, and left.

I grew older, and explored
the place with neighborhood kids.
I'd bounce up and down on piles of tires
that accumulated in the foundation,
and when my leg sank
into the deeper layers
of black rubber and shadow,
I'd quickly pull it out,
scared of what was at the bottom.
But most of the time, I'd fish alone.
use doughballs, corn, and worms, even cheese
or Juniper berries that grew at arm's reach.
Those fish would bite at anything,

and soon I'd have a bucket full of orange and gold,
silver, purple and brown,
undulating in the tannic water.

Sometimes, in the early evening,
there'd be noise in the bushes, I'd catch glimpses
of highschool boys and girls in the tall grass,
holding each other so long
and close and without movement
I thought they'd died.

Bullfrogs punctuated the high-pitched scratch of crickets
as the dusk grew old and collapsed in on itself to night.

Other times, I'd hide in the branches
of white pines that formed the boundary
between the lot and the new development nearby,
and sit there touching my thumb and forefinger together,
pulling them apart,
sticky black resin from the climb up
providing a sensuous resistance.

Below, I could see three red and pink rosebushes;
they were huge and covered with vines.

The air hummed,
and the smell of pine and roses
would cradle me into a trance.

I could trace the path of roses spreading out from their origin,

small dots of color seeping into the billowing greens
and browns of the land's fabric.

I imagined waves of wild roses taking over like groundcover.

STRUCTURE FISHING

In the clear water, I can see the fish
zero in on my minnow, strike,
and head fast for deep shadows.
The yellow and orange float disappears,
and I set the hook the way my father did
when I was learning this art of fishing shoreline,
the same pause and hard yank up,
and the rush of blood that feels so good
I can't stop coming to this lake
where I've watched my image
pulsate on the rippled surface
ever since I can remember,
since before the vivid casts of my father,
red and white spoons
flung out farther than seemed possible.

SUPPLICATION

Hot brick stomach to stomach,
these apartment buildings sleep
at four in the morning,
but some bulbs cast dim lights
from numbered windows.

Various affections go on
in the folds of night's robe.

A single cricket scratches harshly,
fast, like a defective gear.

Heavy black wires
criss-cross the air over the parking lot,
connecting each building to thicker cables,
running pole to pole, to the road,
then on to places supplying electricity,
and other coded signals.

Once, when I was seven or eight
and on vacation with my parents,
I thought I saw a light in the deep trees
beyond our campsite--it was late
and soft snores,
muffled by tent canvas, drifted
out over the breathing lake.

I stumbled under the thatch of leaves,

but never got closer. When it seemed hopeless,
I kneeled on damp ground and cried
because the light was far away.
Father's hand covered my right shoulder.
We walked back together.
He thought I'd been lost.

GRANDFATHER'S CIGAR

It's the cigar I remember,
the smell of it in your sweater,
the slick brown taste of cured tobacco
when you let me try, although
mother had warned us both against it.
At bed time, as I rolled into the sheet,
the odor lingered in my pillow.
I knew you were in the room below
mine, an orange dot in the darkness,
brightening with each intake of breath.
In the morning, I'd find the thick butt
and an inch of cold ash, the cut
you made to draw through still wet
and stained with saliva. No cigarette
could have crossed that barrier
of time. The familiar blur
your face has become, hazy
in the smoke of a quarter century,
the powerful, lasting incense,
is a persuasive presence
in the private church of our family,
implicit in the quietest homilies.

CLEANING THE GUTTERS BAREHANDED

Balanced on top of a stepladder,
I watch for hornets and hold
tight to the eave with one hand.
The stench of decay, scummy slime-feel
makes me cringe and wobble.
I unclog the drain-hole.
Gypsy moth caterpillars,
oak leaves, small twigs,
centipedes sluice to the lawn,
and I scramble down the ladder,
anxious to get to the sink,
to try and wash this smell from my fingers.

TWO EVENINGS

I.

I collected thirty-five
lightning bugs
in a clear sandwich bag,
then stepped on them
until not one was left alive.

What remained was a sludge
of softly glowing green,
thirty-five bodies shining together,
and I reached inside one finger,
cupped at the knuckle, and dredged
up enough light to drag a streak
along the bottom of my arm,
crook of my elbow to wrist.
I held it out at the maximum
distance possible, and watched leak

the luminescence pulsing
into night. My shoulder
grew tired, and the dark,
more intense as the glimmer
spent itself. Realizing

what I was capable of,
the refined lust burned

as I wiped and rubbed
my arm across my belly.
A quarter moon rose above,

slightly askew,
as if some fragile balance
had been thrown off.
Because of me.
It was the first time I knew

of my awful possibility.

II.

I sit in the crooked limb
of an apple tree and watch the sky.
Darkness gives birth to stars,
and a hooked moon drags
my emotions to the galaxy's rim.

Every pock of light in the evening
sky is an emblem of someone's death.
The fireflies spasm and burst
into pale flames,
tiny lanterns signalling

messages I pretend to understand
in the aftermath of such loss.
Small flashes shudder everywhere.

tiny blips of sadness

to cup in my hands,

or let spiral into brief constellations.

BLEEKER & MCDUGAL

Freaks march by in streaks

of green hair and black leather.

Four friends curl at a cafe,

at a table on the sidewalk.

There's talk of sex,

but today I don't listen.

I strain to hear something

I can't quite make out--

floating, glancing off the bones

of faded brick buildings.

I crush garlic croutons to dust

falling to the cement. My friends laugh

at bawdy half-truths, half here,

half there, have mercy on me Jesus.

Is it you humming in my ear?

Old men play chess

in Washington Square, just yards

from dope dealers. "Yo man, what you need?

You need?" Is it guitar music?

Folk City just around the corner--

Bobby Zimmerman came to see Woody.

and stayed--did he hear it too?

My friends laugh--it's the hash--

our eyes shot through with blood.
Another round of Kamikazes.

Japanese pilots, heroes zeroed in
to a no-win situation. Banzai.

"BANZAI!" I yell. My friends laugh.
We pay our bills, find the car.

Voices fade into blue smoke--
spinning jets of bus exhaust.

DOODLETOWN

We went to drink beer
with Bear Mountain ghosts.
The old macadam road sloped up,
cracked by roots and weather,
stained, almost brown,
by years of fallen leaves.
Moss crept in on either side.
We hung out a while
in the remains of the schoolhouse,
ran our fingers over
a wall of carved initials.
Up the road, we scratched
in the small dump for old bottles,
and the rusty cemetery gate
dragged open.
We read inscriptions:
I Was Only Seven.
But I'm Home In Heaven.

Just off the path, Chris found
the skeleton of a small deer,
poached we thought.
Mike said an incantation
and ran to the crest of a hill.

He stood on a rock in the setting sun,
from where I watched, a black silhouette.
He held his arms out from his sides,
shadow of a cross
cast against the circling earth.

DAYDREAM WHILE FISHING
ON THE HUDSON

After renting a boat
just below West Point,
I motor out where
the river drifts strongest.
Arms over the side,
I slash my wrists the way
a friend showed me,
a zig-zag pattern up,
not across. and deep.
fall and disappear,
die, and am just as quickly
alive again.

Past the Indian Point nuclear reactor,
past the spot where Benedict Arnold
sold himself out, past Nyack, Sleepy Hollow,
the slow drag against massive supports
of the George Washington Bridge.
In a car on the Westside highway
a small boy points to my form,
asks his father what I am.

By the docks now,
the Dayliner almost sucks me in.

blades chop off my right hand.

I'm carried in its wake,
out around Ellis Island,
past Liberty Island, the statue
encased in scaffolding.

Small fish nibble at shreds of skin
where the hand was, rents
flap like gills, the sea
feels better than blood
in this dream of home,
New York over my shoulder.

THE FULL-MOONLIGHT WE CAME FOR

POEM

It is the night when
you hear Canadian geese,
see them silhouetted against
the magenta glow of a three quarter moon.
The wind unfolds
like a wave to surround you.
And you ride the backwash
because you want to,
sweeping across hills of fog,
screaming out things
you couldn't say before.

REST STOP OFF THE PALISADES PARKWAY

We lie in grass on top of the palisades.
The bridge slashes across the river,
against the Yonkers shore,
whose lights glitter
like sparks on the other side.
This carafe of warm red wine
is nearly empty--I taste it on your lips.
The perfume of your hair
makes me flush, the warmth lifting--
I rise with it. a shadow against
the full-moonlight we came for.
And you with me, together we rise
turning white-hot in the gray quiet,
the river humming in a pitch so high
we can't hear it,
but feel it tremble inside.
The whole world rises and trembles in soft flames,
when a car door, slammed, cools the night.

POINT PLEASANT WEEKEND

Drinking champagne
out of jelly jars,
we laughed Friday night
into Saturday afternoon.
Half-drunk, watching a Yankee game
go into extra innings,
we fell asleep during a commercial.
When we woke, it was dark,
and rolled into a kiss.

We were on the shore at sunrise.
By eleven the beach was crowded,
so we swam out past the jetty.
I knifed down underneath you
and grabbed your leg like a shark,
but you yielded easily, unafraid.
Before you showered,
I kissed your red-brown stomach.

Days later,
I wet my fingertip,
put it to fine white sand
on your side of the seat.
Touching it to my tongue,
a lingering taste of salt.

RUNNING

Hills become straight-a-ways,

curves become hills.

My side cramps,

falling arches throb,

salt water stings my eyes.

All I hear is panting.

I focus on it,

and don't think about how

you ran me from your life.

I push myself hard,

count white houses

with black shutters,

mail boxes, station wagons.

If I don't rest, don't sleep,

it can't happen. I keep running,

a broken cue stick in my hand,

dogs snarling at my heels.

WOLVERINE

Your teeth are not so much razors,
as they are the serrated edge of your hunger.
Those hot cold-blooded eyes
look me over. I'm a threat,
but one that can be handled
like anything else made of flesh.
I offer you my fingertips;
you chew them off for food,
and because I don't offer you
my whole hands,
you see me as selfish,
when all I really am is scared to death
of the danger you pose,
the confidence with which you dismiss me.

POEM FOR KELLY

In this uncertain exile,
I heat canned ravioli in a saucepan,
stir, stare deeply
into bubbling tomato sauce,
and see you.

We met again over Chinese food.
like the old days.
and discussed the subtle changes.
I expected you to order
shrimp with lobster sauce
like you used to, but you got
sweet and sour chicken,
and you never liked it before.
Tasting my drink I thought,
Jesus, God, Lord,
once this almost ruined my life.

I raise the spoon to my mouth,
scald my tongue, and know it's done.

BEACH

Dolphins rolling up and in,
up and in across the horizon.
I feel hard waves
of sand under my towel,
the glare of the white star
refracting off glass earth.
I close my eyes and there's
a soft glow behind the dark.
I locate sounds around me,
seabirds, children calling
through the hush of the ocean.
Then, sleep.

I surfcast alone in the dusk.
A bottle of Chardonnay lies
half-buried in wet sand.
A few feet farther back,
the tails of two bluefish
stick out like exotic plants.
Water licks and swirls
at my ankles, and I smile
at the smile you'll flash when
I bring these fish home to you.

*

And a hazy eclipse, gradual
opening into brightness.
I turn over to my stomach,
rest my face in folded arms,
and you rub oil on my back
to keep me from burning.
I imagine the shadow
of your body lying over mine.
floating in a wash of lotion.
rubbing smooth circles on my skin,
running fingers back and forth
over my shoulder blades, up
and in, the subtle rhythm
of dolphins following the coast.

THE COUPLE

He watches whirls of leaves
from the big hickory swipe at the window.
One lingers there, pasted by mist to the glass.
She gets into bed, and he shifts,
puts his face down in the pillow.
When he dreams,
it's of her thumb and forefinger
grasping the veins of his wrist,
a hold so tenuous
that just a little rain could bring it down.

LOVE POEM IN TWO PARTS

I

The chain was bound to rust free,
but by then the tree would be strong
enough to keep straight up against
its weight of peaches, and the chain
itself would be part of the whole,
embedded in the thin gray bark.

I wrapped it firm around the trunk,

bolted it fast to the fence post.

And then it was almost sundown,

my lover brought out two cold beers.

Together we felt the night drop,

together on the still warm ground.

II

I walk barefoot in the garden,

through the tomato plants and beans.

Weeds have grown high in your absence.

I notice that slugs eat away

at living things you planted here,

but I leave the place untended.

The peach tree is full of green fruit.

The hot weather will ripen them.

Leaning heavy against the chain,

the tree will strain to be let go,
to fall to earth, an exposure
like a veil pulled hard from a face.

READING SALINGER BY CANDLELIGHT

I.

When the lights shut off

I was reading Nine Stories

with thunder grumbling through the silence.

At that very moment.

I remembered the candles

I'd used to wax

the runners on my nephew's sled.

whispered "damn,"

and patted around for my car keys.

II.

The lack of streetlight changes things.

I drive and watch for that first light

of convenience stores still open

where I can buy candles I need.

III.

The lights are still off when I get back,

so I strike a match, put it to the wick,

drip wax on a turned-over coffee cup.

The flame shimmys

in the breeze from the open window

as I get through

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish."

when the doorbell rings. and she walks in.

Put down the book. You'll hurt your eyes.

She blows out the candles and giggles,

Where were you when the lights went out?

IV.

An hour later, I make gin and tonics
holding the flashlight under my chin.

We're naked.

I drop and break the light
when she gets fresh with an ice cube.

I relight the candle, and she asks,
What? No olives?

Au contrere, my love. Olives and wax.

I never go anyplace without 'em.

And when I bring her the jar, beaded
with condensation, she eats one,
puts one in her drink, and I find her foot, lightly
run my tongue over the arch,
kiss the slender curve: Hey!
Hey, yourself.

FAITH

THE CIRCLE CLOSES TIGHTER

I've learned to avoid them,
in bars, at stores,
odd places around,
changed to something
I didn't expect or want.
I dread the forced flat interchange
between old friends who've
nothing left to say.

LEAVING BAKERSFIELD
AND TWO GOOD FRIENDS
I HADN'T SEEN FOR THREE YEARS

Oil rigs show up and down
in the strangest places,
beside stucco houses
with pool-table top lawns,
in lots behind shopping malls,
throughout the long straight backways,
dissecting fields of carrots,
cotton, orchards of plums and peaches
big as a baby's head.

Don and Dave drove me back
to LA International,
over the Grapevine,
past hills of dry grass
and dirt bike trails cut through and over some,
passed by roaring laden trucks of grapes
going 80. making clacking noises
on the lined reflectors as they crossed
lanes. I felt a tremor.
It made me sad to think two good friends
might slide into the ocean.

A POEM FOR FRIENDS

We sit around the campfire,
and drink beer from tall cans.
This is our life,
like a touching of fingertips
awash in the sounds of water,
opening out on gray chains of driftwood.
We pool our joy and insecurities
at the center of our friendship.
Tiny embers snap from the fire,
and we follow their trails into darkness.

AN INEXPENSIVE VACATION

The hours guessing
where loons would reappear
weren't wasted,
here in camp with friends.
In other places,
we play expected parts,
choices we had to make
once, and not turn back.
Here, where shadows
hold moose and bear.
I think we will never be so sure
that family goes deeper
than arbitrary names.
The sun melts into the mountains,
as if on cue, holy laughter
slides off the lake and echos
through the hush of dusk.
Four friends worship together,
in a chapel of their own creation.

A PUBLIC GESTURE

Tonight, on David Letterman's show,
I saw a man stop
an electric fan with his tongue.
He stuck it out, into the whirl
of metal blades, and they slapped
against it until he jammed them
for a moment, and then bowed,
jubilant, to a cheering studio audience.

I wonder what led
this bartender from Pennsylvania
to try it the first time, when he,
after covering a hundred or so
in bar bets, performed
that strange cunnilingus
for the eyes of spectators.
Was he so drunk he'd do anything
to amaze the stiff customers,
or was it a stunt to attract women
who wouldn't otherwise look twice?

Was it a poke down the throat
of one's own destiny, so mysterious
that the fear of being sliced dropped?

Or did the opened mouth prove too irresistible
to just kiss on the lips?

FAITH

If life is a highway stretching
coast to filthy coast, then
I'm at a greasy midwest truck stop
with a flat and out of gas.
"Here's your coffee with cream,
and your sweet sweet roll,"
snickers the balding waitress.
She takes my last two dollars.
I want to smash my head through
the side of the jukebox,
stick my teeth in the grooves
of sad country singles flipped
from a stack, one by one,
playin' "dropkick me Jesus,
through the goalposts of life,"
in endless variations until
the pulse of the rhythm
is like my heartbeat. But then
I'm led by the hand.
He pours water in my tank,
touches his hand to my tire,
touches his hand to my cheek,
and sends me on my way.
He leaves for heavier burdens,
while I head west, tailpipe

dragging sparks in the cold
oilslick night.

IN THE STORM

The reverberation of black evening
thunder wells up inside me,
my spine fused to the sheet metal wall
I kneel in front of, lean back against.
I catch rain like the cup of a red tulip.

A streak of lightning cracks the darkness,
and I'm a flickering candle by a confessional.
hearing muffled absolutions all day.
At night, I stand in shrouded grace,
stained glass street light.

EIRE

Rubber bullets bounce back
from deep in the chest.

Small hands with no callouses
throw bricks and bones;

shards lie at Kathleen's feet.

Sean's red hairs and James' red hairs
stand on end.

LATE SHIFT

She works nights,
spends her afternoons
washing sheets
and black panties,
watching them swish
around and back
in a laundromat washer window,
worried about rent money.
Worried about rent money.

COURTSIDE

for Amy

She bounces lightly
from toe to toe
in a hot sweat
until the yellow blur
comes at her,
something to be
beaten back each time
until she wins.
Backhand, forehand,
lob, attack the net,
every volley's
an emphatic threat.
Instincts can be
sharpened and hardened,
long days in the sun
Learning that sweet spot,
the narrow line
between out and in,
and a way to control
the backspin.

DUCK'S POEM

"You shucks yer clothes, but they
follow you around;" that's the way
Duck explained thirty-three years
of jails and heroin, bar fights, the tears
he wouldn't cry if you tore off his hand.
He lit a Camel, took a drag. "You understand?
You get the picture?" I didn't answer
his questions, and, when the cancer
finally rotted out his rough black
throat, he'd just watch me and hack.
I sat as the window light grew thin,
considered each shattered city where he'd been.

DIGGING IT ON PIER 84

I'm on the bleachers,
staring out at ash gray sky
through the back of a Dr. Pepper sign
held aloft on the white
scaffolding framing the stage.
The U.S.S. Intrepid looms in one eye,
the half-round side
of the UPS building in the other.
Smells of the Hudson,
fried food, and Thai weed
waft by on a cool harbor breeze.
Miles lips the horn,
his back turned to floating fans,
jazz crying out over the river.

BREEZY SUMMER MORNING

The wind blows whiffs
of compost at me.
Have to spread lime,
and the kitten scrambles
up the magnolia, backs
back down, and skids
after rolling oak leaves
whose life in the sun lasts and lasts.

LAKE DEFOREST 8/3/82

Duck feathers float like
fragile sails
past lazy schools of carp
dipping fins near the surface.

An old man wearing a baseball cap
fishes off a lawn chair,
watches a cat stalk the high grass,
sparrows diving at water bugs.
His eyelids waver
while crickets testify,
scratch out their dirge.

THE GRASS

Walt,

In Virginia, friends and I read poems
to each other in a graveyard
behind the Halifax County Farm Service Center
and Regional Library.

Your song was on my mind there.

The grass, slightly damp, where we sat
among old tombstones, new tombstones,
and our poems were surely confirmations
that nothing does collapse,
and what we supposed about death
was no different or luckier
than the scattered buttercups.

I sucked green juice from a blade of grass

I picked from the top of a small child's grave.

Vita

