Zeus,

Your will, finally, is unknowable. I am exhausted, exasperated. Look where my most willful vows have landed me. Father, mother, and a brother already underground, exiled for eternity from our native Thebes . . . I claim no kin in that city. My so-called sister mourns alone, respected by a fool and other frauds, a quorum of spineless idiots posing as law-abiding citizens. The offense reeks—a blind man can see that. No one deserves such a sentence, least of all my deceived, much-wronged brother—left to rot on the desert plain. Generations will know I would not accept that unjust decree. I am not sorry, though I admit I may have misjudged the jury of the gods. Here I will end my otherwise unending agony, groomless, convicted, and unconvinced. From now on, on the surface of this most grotesque earth, my name will echo, a doer of deeds, one who believes, who acts, while Creon—cruel, unjust—will be forever banished from the rolls of the noble.

Always, always, always,
Antigone

Retirement Poem

“The process of living and the process of making art are the same.”
—Michael Moos

My colleague, mentor, friend, and twelve-year neighbor, Michael Moos is retiring. The post-Catholic master of laissez-faire Buddhism who makes of grading a walking meditation, whose student acolytes at times make of him a minor god, and over time have made of his ceiling a beautiful version of hell: a Michelangelic tribute to a poem, a man, a method of instruction where the master refuses all titles and power resides in every student . . . none abandoned hope who entered there.

Our auburn-bearded bard will roam these halls no more, but nest with raven and sparrow in St. Paul, Ortonville, the Black Hills; pen, paper, and fly rod close at hand; each new day in that unsung paradise called the Midwest a quiet adventure. He will sing a song of trout and teach the air its many names. He may even become fluent in Bison before long. He will seek out the soul of the plains, and sketch his map in verse. And on our behalf, he’ll scratch down dreams we didn’t know we had.

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Why I Am Not Frank O’Hara

Today I’m feeling very Frank O’Hara in my new chartreuse shirt. Of course, I lack his rakish widow’s peak and almost Roman profile. I lack his Manhattan address and his avant-garde coterie. I will never pose for Larry Rivers or Alice Neel, never (much as I’d like to) own a Fairfield Porter or Jane Freilicher.

I will never saunter into a typewriter shop on my lunch break and tap out a new poem to accompany that evening’s cocktails. I lack a certain savoir-faire, a certain je ne sais quois. I’m a straight Midwesterner, a secondary school teacher with two sons in tow, but my step is jaunty nonetheless.

I’ve got the summer off, and today we’re going on vacation! I’ve packed my fly rod and my Du Fu. Nothing can bring me down, not even standing in shuffling line after shuffling line for ticketing, baggage check-in, and security. Don’t they get tired? They look tired.

For nearly eight years they’ve been on orange alert! In front of these uniformed strangers I take off my belt and shoes, offer up my cellphone, my house and car keys, then slip through their metal detectors undetected. My only identifying traits: a jaunty step and a chartreuse shirt.

They are dumpy orange porpoises diving into a landlocked sea of green. They are the pigs of the fruit world, rooting in a massive mess of sprawling vines. Acres of these umbilical threads connect them to the earth, this small home from which none of us wants to be torn. They squat, make themselves heavy, practice passive resistance. These oblate and oblong orbs that resist rising mimic the harvest moon. Or is it vice versa? Gravity, not time, is on their side. For all that, they are jovial, avuncular. They seem to have a sense of humor. Okay then, what is the purpose of a pumpkin? Like everything else, they love themselves and want to propagate. They seek posterity in future generations of pumpkins. And like so much else on earth, they are sacrificed for our appetites. Their pulp becomes pie.

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Playing Ping-Pong With My Son

Every time! He beats me every time
now—so different from just last summer.
He revels in destroying me, in
holding me to single digits. While
serving, he admires the new contours
of his shirtless arm. He covers his end
of the table with insouciant glee,
dancing like Cassius Clay, returning one
unreturnable shot after another
while nattering on about movies,
music, friends, and sports. Cursing his
preposterous agility and speed,
I plod like Liston and lunge at air,
about to go down—again. Last week,
the new neighbor swore she’d seen a young
man exiting my house. I denied it
until I realized she meant him:
my teenage son—all sinew, bone, and easy
laughter—making his uncharted way
by burying me a little every day.

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