

Spring 2020

Might Could

Cody Donovan Hosek

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Recommended Citation

Hosek, C. D.(2020). *Might Could*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/5841>

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MIGHT COULD

by

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Bachelor of the Arts
Clemson University, 2017

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses poetry to draw attention to the means in which we communicate ourselves and our experience, namely in the aftermath of loss—loss of loved ones, of a sense of home, loss of trust in the veracity of one’s own senses. While exploring these affective spaces, attention was drawn especially to the eye and the translation implicit in the mind’s work of perception. The writing process involved returning to the sites of home—the Outer Banks, the Blue Ridge mountains, Oconee county, the southern stretch of Appalachia—and it is in this dynamic geography that the images, more often natural than not, find their origin. As a result, the use of haiku organically emerged as a means to pair the work of the eye and mind in order to unveil what is seen but goes left unsaid. Its formal influence is stretched across the manuscript, often running up against the differing aesthetic values of other forms. The haiku is collided with the sonnet in the “cape lookout” series, a decision that elucidates the useful commonalities between haiku’s pairing and the sonnet’s volta. It is in these instances of friction that the poems occupy in order to question how we decide to tell ourselves and what gets excised from those decisions. When coupling the two series in the manuscript, “prelude” and “cape lookout,” the difference between what the eye records and what the mind perceives creates ample space for the speaker to recognize identity in light of invention. It is my hope that the collection, once fully realized, will offer something of use to our understanding of the self and our understanding of what decisions are made when we share that self with another.

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CHAPTER 1
MIGHT COULD

almost like a picture book

in my memory
of the living room, I keep
the victrola spinning

I sit in the bedroom
with pillow feathers affixed
to my sweat-lined heel

& outside the window
shining in puddle
that full April moon
the same as I was born under
pink as the dawn

in my mind it's always night
& there's a frail wind & a rattle & blue clouds
hunting just past the treetops

red eye to Memphis

from here
Jocassee's cloudy eye
can still be seen
if only for a moment
glinting faintly
easy to miss

eyelashed by four o'clocks
catchflies & other nightblooms
that rim the clay banks
at evening's haze

& the lake's pier
& a couple it once held
can be seen
even now
through a closed eye

a dream had & loved once
emerged from when the attendant
offers drinks & the rocks of your choice
wet the traces of sleep still lost
at the edges of your blinks

soon that slick eye
will reopen, waiting
to alight
& flick back
the flame of dawn
on all your shelved desires

a recent recovery

—there is no one left
to remember

the creek
was surrounded
by crepe myrtles
in full & static bloom
lit by the sketch paper moon
of early morning
& the rain
slithered ahead of us
& reticulated
the broken bodies
of ephemerals

the bank's pebbles
sang pressure
into our calves,
our heels blushing
from poison sumac,
his neck craning so
he could see
his own reflection
in the lapping water—

when he reached
the water's warm chin
he didn't sink, no,
not an inch—an inch lifted
by peach blossom fish.

prelude

just the other night
I had to be reminded
of the sky, its capacity,
by favor of a passing cloud
over a crooked moon
& I remembered the edges
of the trees
& all the buildings
& all the other metals
of the new day
that cast their shadows
into all that precious
real estate
but the sky
don't seem
to mind at all

seems as good a place
to begin
as any

walking up the cul-de-sac
& down & up & down again
watching the bats clock out

the birds punch in
& explode from the grass
in their unpredictable bouquets

the chests of house finches
red, bloodied thumbprint
of some hand
that plucked them
out of the dirt

organized invisibly
by a current or a fear
or moved by some friction
that they're only obliquely aware of
like the way smokers
know their pockets

behind
comes the blind cobra
of the rain

the broken whistle
of the rain

comes the long razor
of the rain

the bedsheets of rain
unfurling onto the pothole moons
down the street

each stray drop
loud as a rattle
when it finally finds
some skin
or a puddle
to ripple
like a
little picture
of sound

& westward leaves

the westward leaves
flapping their gums
in an easterly breeze

like a dream
I used to wish I had
on my own

without the wind
before I relented to the wind
& its new arrangements
for the hair on my head

when the bats clock back in
sometimes it's in a wind so stiff
it turns you to bones
& blown apart in it
hollowed under
the pickpocketing hand
of a streetlamp
that I cast four shadows under
each as true as the one
to their right & their left
I've been taking my time
looking out

watching the bats
turn to confetti
as they disappear
into distance

I have changed
& been moved
invisibly, too

up ahead,
all the animal kingdoms
of light
are here

the breath
of a lamp
filling the space
of a living room

the living liquid
of a porchlight
ensnared in a cloud
of smoke
betraying the body underneath

the plodding feet of headlights
walking the heavy path

forlorn, pacing, coming back
to say something
& mean it

cauliflower on blue tarp

a palmful of alabaster
marked with labyrinthine folds
that end in creases of shadow

the earth's risen dough
full as a child's head in my hands
ripe & mighty as a drum-beating cloud

yet silent as lightning's outstretched arm,
the million-edged snow, the pale morning trumpet
of the sun cascading

along the pockmarked stretch of sky I occupy
to tidy the day's harvest
into cloudbanks

soon to be carted off, broken apart,
& served with slices of melon
& small dishes of salt

come & let us dine
on what our hands have wrought
& brought to our mouths to repeat

may fly

neon hums,
I agree,
like a mouth
or just the vocal cords
plucked like a harp string
by the flip of a switch

but aside from the sound
I have always loved so much more
that fuzzy light
when it's caught
in a little pocket
of fog or smoke
& it looks so appetizing
that I might want to bite a portion off
& glow like a jar of summer bugs

& it's those stupid thrills,
pithy excitements
that momentarily distract me
from the fear & draw
of what people offer
& its charge

lit up red, blue,
or sometimes pink

humming somewhat
like a song I've heard before

shadow play with a lamp & a drawn shade

these are some stories
that you can only tell
with your back to the light

in this here faint light
my hands dip
into memory—

the left shapes
a crown of kudzu
while the right, flat,
forms the hard clay
of the embankment
the water just past it
flickered with sunlight
glittering on the bare wall

reset the hand
& again with the right
with just a bent ring finger
you can see
my great grandfather's hand
the lost digit, somewhere, sleeping
deep in the south china sea
the pearly shipwreck
rife with coral or
floating in a fish's belly

after a while
you can feel
it how a twisted hand
erects a streetlamp
in your chest

& after a while
you begin to see it
those horizon waters
murky & speckled

with microscopic life
like some dusty mirror
inviting enough to steal a glimpse
& disappear into
as if into the mouths
of snapping turtles

autoignition

the sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron.

Deuteronomy 28:23

yes, call it what it is:
hair littered with the rocks
of the driveway, lone bulb overhead

revealing a new topographical skin:
rings of fists, divots of knuckle, all that ablation
& jagged edge, quick to swell, slow to flatten

& yes, there were wannabe boxers
waiting for their turn with the man
on their right, on their left, yes

the thought of it tickles the blood, yes
yes, it steams it good
reduces it, yes, like oil

in a pan, hard little reminder skittering along
the belly, the heat of it reduces blood
to iron lumps tumbling in the vein

it makes me want
to twist on my old pair
of hands

when cartilage gives way
to bone, like talc
to quartz, I can smell it

yes, the smoke of
igneous rock
regressing, yes, volcanic

downtown after plasma selling

I cloistered the child in me
with a plan to beg someone
to slap my cheeks bare
& oxblood
I'm here for it
rubbing the ridges left
from the gauze knot & cotton ball
orbiting the bar for another to blur
the memory of thick needles
& the weight of plastic cups
& the shine of ejaculate under fluorescence
& the smell of magazines rubbed down
with alcohol wipes & the sweat of other
people's hands
I'm here waiting
hoping to be found
under all this neon
come catch me
like a germ in agar
with the promise
that it doesn't last
like this much longer

shipwrecks

manifold lilacs
& the collected varieties
of wildflowers
dot the plains of
the city's vacant lot

their stems like masts
holding rotted sails
that bitter the frosting field
with their static refusal
to disappear

their seeds like anchors
untethered, unbound below
the wake
waiting for the sun
to come & shallow
the frothed water above
to return them
somewhere brighter

variations

heron blue as the sky tonight
that my words are too fickle for
my vocabulary's running
down my ears
words finding themselves
in odd marriages all around

I'm as heron blue as a sky
in the dread ring of summer
& I've got a crystal lantern
shading my form & lightening
my path & a pale blue horse
I'm saddling alone

heron blue as newborn steel
in the shade of the mill I bed down
in the late morning
& it overwhelms

I'm caught up in the avenues, love,
the darkling options fleeing me
as the hours wind on
spent finding a name
for myself

coat rack

just inside your door, I stand,
alone & bare, a witness while
routines awake like ghosts. I hear
a music climb the foyer walls,
the squeal of kettles, rattling cups.

across from my post, a clock
unwinds, its hands begin to fall
& when they reach the floor, the door
unlocks to let you stumble in.
you'll slip your hat on me & wrap
your coat around my bones & lay
your boots beside my feet, a trace
of heat residing still, the day's
been-theres & done-thats.

I'll catch a glimpse before you go
to where I can't follow, I'll stand
& wait for morning's call, a chance
to steal a glance before I'm robbed
of what's borrowed & never owned.

purples

Tis true, my form no Tyrian purples grace.

E. Cave

my hands dip in blood.
mouthful portions, purple.

broken, boiled, strained
by heat & light & lead vat.

day in, day out, my hands,
they like the work.

pair of greased palms longing,
no matter the stain

no matter the broken
bodies lining the vats

awaiting the vats
prostrated in the sea,

no matter. thousands dead
for a drop, killed for caterwauling

merchants, royals, princes
of states near & far, the sea

churns a healthy price for them.
no matter, my hands dip in blood,

return clotted in the sacrifice
of fellow predators pulled from the deep.

I smell the rotten fish of bodies
melting on the beach, melting in the vat,

melting into baser fluids.
no matter, my hands like the work,

they return sanctified,
blessed in a fleeting purple.

the raised blood in my hand, the key
to a beached & marooned grace, watch it spill

onto the rippled, clotted mirror wherein my open hand
reflects up to the sky. what royalty comes

from this, from the broken shell, the pilfered sea,
from tidy tubs of purple blood.

dream sounds

I swear that fan's ticking like a clock

hear the yelp of
the shoebox dog
buried under
the shadowed oaks
& the retort
of the buried .38

they share a plot
where the hills roll soft
like morning thunder
behind bedroom glass

I reckon I been lucky my whole life

a thrown stone's yield
of two dead birds in a field

we call this song
Luck

if I have to tell you one more time

a call from the folding chairs
on the pinewood porch
coalesces in the ear

even a cat flattens
under fence slats
away

I heard once the hairs
will spot danger first

figure it might could

stand & watch the animalblossom

of songspun birds
perched on rainslick powerlines

like a row of suncheated posies
digging their roots in electricity!

after a dream

of puddles
like spilled sapphires
licked by light
from a silver-tongued moon
that tipped the pines
from the parted teeth
of a summer night
& the roused smile
of the ripples
from an unnotched leaf
meeting the face
of the mirrored waters

the morning stars count their number
& fall asleep behind fog banks
leaking from steam pipes, to the sound
of car alarms & the song
of a lone chime
on a frayed string
stirred by the gust
of a closing door

right quick

for so long, it seems,
we play peekaboo
with time

we shield our faces from it
with our fingers latticed
like thin warm veils
in front our eyes
& we adjust to it
we look past the obscurity
believe our sight to be
complete & chaste
until the veil lifts
when death purses its lips
& blows us apart
like dandelions

but in that diffuse
& scattered after
perhaps we'll metamorphize
into spinning tops
into the morning sky's paraffin wax
into two pair of wren
flying over that pale highway home
forever

at least
this is what I've hoped after
all these days of spring rain
my hands pocketed
watching the wind garden
meeting the free & open faces
of the wildflowers
finally, after long absence

cape lookout

when the storm broke,
gulls burst from clouds & the air smelled
of rose brass & salt

& the fog, so young,
rose along the path to the
ferry dock, dewing

ankles, hiding feet,
windbroken limbs from seapines
curved like collarbones

up above the heads
of the procession, above
the horned owl's still eye

no more than a half day dead.

in life & death, eyes
reflect warped portraits: branches
bounced back as fingers

in a leashed dog's eye
as he sniffed the owl's last molt
& wet both the eyes

with a heavy tongue.
ears tucked, he reflected back
as human skull, slipped

a fang to ripple
the pupil, to drink from the
dark waters held there

until forced to heel & pulled away.
from his mouth, drippings freckling the rocks.

as the ferry filled
a child stooped, fetched roseblack stones
to throw. the hand's touch

renamed *strange* to *smooth*
to *known & forgiven*, then
cast them all the same.

the dusk & dawn twirled
in the breeze behind the ears.
the ferry sat still

on the pale waters,
filled with churned sand & sunlight,
surrounding the depths.

the engine turned over,
the stones sank into the eye.

out in the channels
the sun finished crawling from
the sea, fog burned to

a thinner vapor,
invisible to the eye,
until it rejoined

the clouds, hardened them
to anvils hanging above
dogs, castle builders.

the sun eclipsed all
day, the passing favor of
one slow cloud, another.

at the foot of the lighthouse
the rangers said *two by two*.

sweethearts, strangers paired
& climbed. through binoculars
they saw the whole world

reevaluated:
tiny crabs swollen like whale
eyes. the rorshach of

mourning doves' plumage,
a lone leatherback anchored
in high-noon-dazzled

white sand, too large to
fit the scope, a sand crusted
eye, the crest of shell.

they saw a crowd collect.
out came the measuring tape

out came cameras,
the ropes & the tide. they mouthed
whatarelief thank

god. the rangers crossed
the broken shells, the roseblack
stones lining the way

to push onlookers
back & get pictures with the
miracle. fingers

reflected in the eye
of the leatherback, as did
the back of a knee.

they shivered when they saw binoculars
staring back hundreds of feet beyond the reach of the pines.

under pewter skies
the day took many days. rays
of light unobscured

a searchlight roaming
the dunes, the sun
an eye peeking through

a punctured shell. death
provides a spyglass, shows the
chatoyant twins

of the eye reflected,
focuses on the inner
yieldings, desires

to be seen
& not looked away from.

mill town

it's the season of tape
sealing the windows
as snow finds itself
in the community tonight

the early winter sunset
makes the night forever
& the nervous wringing
of dry hands the season's music
while the crickets are gone

those with light bulbs left
keep their porch lights on
for the neighborhood's kids
playing in the road

they draw in chalk around the potholes
like they're dressing wounds
or conjuring portals in the street

in the hopes that one day
they'll be able to peek past
its dusty bars

might could

even silence has turned away
from us, left us with
the manifold possibilities
for the speed of breath:

the suck of a rung sob
a spilled sigh &
the textured ruffle
of hair against collar
hair against brim
hair twisted in the soft hands
of us bereaved

when we go to tell the story of you
will we include this too?
the speed of it,
the volume

what shape must it take &
what vessel could bear
that sound

all these faint twirls of breath
these fangless rattles of the cords

what vessel could

save for that fluid geometry
of flame

a funeral for roadkill, then a conversation with my neighbor

I figure there was just this irresolute fact about it

before you reach
the dead end of Aston lane,
I was watching
a daytime raccoon
cross the road

he had this something
about his mouth
this catty-corner twist to it
bit of a tooth peeking out
but still a real sense of balance
in that pretty little strut of his

it was a really pretty, gone
when those wheels
caught up to him
caught him clean
about the neck
& the hide

& for a second
I watched the shadow
of a red cloud
hold a little
on the pale asphalt

it was the bitter
first tapping of autumn
about the fingers
& toes, the leaves
were creasing
& falling & outlining
what looked like
wet little cherries

*

after the burial
I crossed the street
to return my neighbor's shovel
& sitting alone on the porch
her hair twirling in the stiff
September wind
she says

*don't you know
that life of yours
ain't your own*

&

*clean that off
I don't keep no mud
in the shed*

I'm about 20 ft off, sitting on a sheet metal roof, when lightning strikes

& leaves a little stolen fire
from heaven
tangled up
in the bare arms
of the live oak

the delicate fractured shadow of canopy
blocking less & less of the grass
as flame works its way from branch
to trunk, from leafback to face,
my ears boxed from the pressure
of ozone & the warning from
the broken mouth of the trunk
spitting out a few floating ashes
from its thrush throat:

better move

ash

when it was time
to succumb
to your parting wishes
gravity increased
& the hyacinths
bowed their many heads
they knew your favorite color
since you were small
& drawing first breaths

are you still
the man
whose neck I burdened
with cherry blossoms

in hope
to your lap
I fold
& join
the melted palms
that collect there

the clouds bruise
split, & bleed
loose rain combs my hair
here
in my garden tilled with ash
five pounds given
back to the earth
whose rebirth
you are complicit in

its incumbent life
my burden

roots crown the dust
of your skull
the dawn blisters

[tow truck]

the fisherman
happy with his catch
pulls it aboard
ever so slowly

marks black, scratches
along the flanks, a few
scales missing
& a fractured fin

his shirt folds in the breeze
sent skittering along
the murky waters
from a passing car

[flat tire]

the ear discerns thunder
over the radio, the hands
interpret the quaking wheel
as the car pivots from roll

to trot. the eye investigates,
sees mile marker 66,
sees rainbow of myriad commuters,
& together they find a nail

half buried, half bent,
hot to the touch, a hiss leaking
from a wound. the mind suggests
the nail has waited for this

felled

I get carried away
little by little
by ants

& small things
bore into me

& my tongue is burnt
on the hot drink
of boredom

that I sip from
& think of days gone by

when my outstretched hands
cupped chalices of light
thick enough to sip

when I was mighty
& verdant

alive & not merely
something to trip along
the path

won't you bend
& see

my rings, look upon
my rings & see
what I have earned myself

before it came time
to lie & to be overcome

by circles & circles
of time gone by
just to come round again

each time etched
as something to remember by

just a minute ago

thru fog melt & then thru
some # of dead corn
stood a postcard red barn
with a fetus painted on &
GIVE LIFE
A CHANCE
stamped underneath
the southernmost twist
of still tethered cord

while I stared,
a pair of eyes
locked with mine
thru the blinds
& somewhere
a crow crowed

& while I was standing
watching, being watched
I wanted time
to have a looser grip
on life, its naming:
9 months
18 years, 21,
or 99 & said
to have had a long run of things,
the time to watch after children
of once children & watch 52 turns of mars

I stood wanting time
to stop turning me
from a spinning fog
to a dead stalk
to a state of being
tethered to nothing
but the firm red edge
of someone else's
architecture

when I drove off

husks & lungful portion of dust

kicked up behind the wheels

& felt something like a dread coming in the wind

postlude

the moon & stars are absent tonight by the egg white
of the city's burn, the carrion birds are catering to their tastes

by the highway at water's edge. I am with them, parked,
watching a fawn be renamed according to its remains:

the thigh, the ribs glinting pearlbone by headlight, the tongue stiff as a plank;
ants stride across it, towards the precipice, poised above the sea of predew grass,

& continue underneath. I am of the birds & of their quarry
& I am with the mischievous velvet of a midnight bed

& a cold hand's circumnavigation of my throat—the thrushes,
swallows, sparrows of morning have found themselves transfigured

to nightingales, nighthawks, redbeaked wanderers
between the blades of the sedges & the soft rush

growing by the airport's chain-link perimeter,
looking for anywhere else to go.

the path I've left breadcrumbs along

so if you find fault with me now,
find fault with me then, when I started
without knowing the end
& chased after ordinary things

find fault in me & the afternoons spent
picturing myself in rooms I had no particular business in
rooms of common splendor, rooms of possibility
only half-imaginable

looking for something
that might make me say

yes, this, at last, is something
I might hang my hat on

this is my dance & this is my song
these are the tools I've known my life by
& this is the dogeared map on which I've sketched
the body of my presence
with a hand light as feather
light as all the feathers
on the back of nightwandering birds
& light as the lilting hems of their shadows
crossing over me & my wayward path

& when those birds go calling
I go looking

& when it's not just another shadow I find, perhaps
they might rebuke me not utterly
for pawing for ordinary things
like the place
where the wind begins
where I am told to hush
& listen a while

full as a chime

when something unseen
comes passing by
& touches me

the well & the bitter acre

bucket in hand,
I go to tie the rope & pull
a shadowy drink
from the depths,
from beneath
the square acre
where flame azalea grows
& flickers in the breeze
like prayer candles

the water pulled tastes of opposites,
like earth,
sharp & distinct
like a blade
that whittles my tongue
to fearsome shapes
yet, soft & ever-needed
like a painting I paid to see,
of stars, one man's impression
that put lights in my eyes

dimly lit, I stand
in the textures
of this night
whose walls
are waxy & creased
from touch

my touch,
curious & fearful
as I trace my inheritance,
my bind—bloodroots,
nightshades, Oconee bells ringing
from an inch above the soil—have I gone
& missed the call?

I linger among those
who await their own

the wildflowers
looking for some sign
of season's end
in the faces of the leaves
that float down to visit them

many times
I've been caught
from the shades
gathering enough light & water
for a mirror to shave by,
a mirror to wash in front of
so when I place
love's necklace on
once more

it will weigh me
a few spare ounces deeper
into the ground
that I've known
& have, finally,
brought to my breast—

the prodigal son
has returned
but there is no one
to greet

the flowers surround
& stare at me like fools,
like the fool that stares
back at them
& expects an answer

whose lantern will I find shelter in now
& what may I adorn myself with

a cold wind's come through
this old chore coat,
rooting through its pockets,

pilfering what little is left

I must go in soon
& tidy my hair
with a dead man's comb
& place my feet
in a dead man's boots

I left to find where
I'd lost myself, now I must
do the opposite

the hidden city

the heart is peopled
& has many streets
winding avenues
& wind-perused stands
of last season's fruits

it is cobbled over in places
brick laid long ago
retooled & replaced
according to the hand of some recent whimsy

there's a wind that hollows & howls
like a train, arriving frequently
& always on time
though the years have gone by
since I last held the schedule

it rolls familiarly on
just as strangers part on sidewalks
or the way we naturally turn
our heads when embracing

& there are many streetlamps
lacking bulbs but not power
it still crackles in their sockets—
the maintenance overdue
the call to act unanswered

there's a familiar & tangible
current of the dark
a pocket of wind within to walk

when some new method comes
some spark of ingenuity or passion
finds the heart inhabited
&, though bitterly, departs,
its trousers rolled, its coat
pulled up against the dark

continental breakfast at the hotel that shadows a graveyard & an esso

the streetlights have closed their eyes

guests whisper their evenings to each other through

thin cups, stirred steam, thin spoons

reasons for stirring the bed

preparations for the weather here & what there holds

or held – here's holding 70 & climbing steady,

no clouds in sight, none on their way

at least so I've been told –

there's a sterile din, dry & necessary questions

did you forget anything, do you have everything,

did you bring the key for the man at the desk

do we need gas, should we stop, do we have everything,

did you forget

I'm ready when you are

speaking no more of great distance

the risks, dangers, the spent rubber of blown tires

cockroached, the outstretched legs tasting the air

no clouds as far as I can see from a tidy window

just a shadow

cast from a red turtleneck pinned taut on a clothesline

that seems to float

a sun-cast Christ in a shadow skimming along the grass

go on, I whisper, do your worst

rap my eyes with a spoon & crack their shell like an egg

taste from what they offer

otherwise, there's fuel to fetch, another map to consult

the destination does not ask the journey for favors

donut mart

I have looked
for a chrysalis
to obliterate in, too—

I've rooted myself,
hidden behind my fingers
& let them be twisted to parlor tricks
for tidy sums, twisted into sleights of hand
that provide the prerequisite pleasure to disappear
like the midnight muscle memory of strangers,
of sellers of snake oil & their buyers
whom I've let crawl over me like ants,
taking & leaving their kingdoms of dirt
around my swollen heels, taking 40s,
24s, 12s & leaving the remaining change on the rail
like tokens for the boatman
to take them up the lane
far from here,
far from me,
me glued
to my feet,
my feet glued
to the highways
where you don't linger anymore—

like a station with no pumps
inviting its once regulars
to remember