

Interview with Alex Boyd

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Among the remarkable images in your book include the idea that your father's body has "grown more wind than flesh." I have my own poem about the fear of losing my father. At the risk of a vague question, what is it about men and their fathers?

Everything. We want to be like them. We want to be different from them. We are afraid of becoming them. We lean on them. We ignore them. We want to be stronger, wiser, happier, more prosperous than them.

In the last poem in *The Lost Country of Sight*, I describe a dream in which my father stands on the shore and scatters the ashes of his father while I watch at his side. There's a moment in the poem when my father and I pause and listen, waiting for "whatever marks the distance between a father and a son."

I think that moment for me is the beginning of an answer to this question. I don't know if there's a succinct answer, but perhaps it lies in the complexity of the bond between fathers and sons—how a father is many things at once and at different times: a trailblazer, a role model, a rival, a counselor, a mirror, a landmark, and a friend.

When I left home the first time to attend university, my father pulled me aside and confided in me that he would not live a long life. He knew that the combination of diabetes, Addison's disease, and obesity would mean he most likely would be around when I came to be his age. It was a sobering thought—one that stuck with me and colored much of how I wrote and thought and engaged with world and with my family. Even now, years after his death at 59, I am haunted by his words, aware of my mortality, and conscious of the ephemerality of each day and interaction.

Every father and son relationship is a little different, but I do think that whether as a presence or an absence, fathers play a critical role in defining the lives and views of their sons. Which perhaps is unsurprising, given how much of our lives are spent being compared to our fathers. When our fathers at last are gone, we find ourselves lost, momentarily unmoored and untethered, until we realize that their words, actions, and dreams continue on reflected in all we do to either carry them on or leave them in the past.

Which is to say, I think we are always either striving to emulate some aspect of them or actively constructing ourselves in opposition to them. Our lives in this respect become one long conversation with our fathers. And then one day we wake up and that father is gone. The conversation becomes one-sided; what we could not say or could not do, remains unsaid and undone; and in the end, we find ourselves speaking to memories, ghosts, quiet rooms, and the empty page.

Your opening poem in The Lost Country of Sight, is a poem called "In the Long Dream of Exile," and other poems have lines about "small children / in light weight clothes / almost ascend into the sky," or that someone can be "the one who is always nowhere, too late and too soon." There's very much a sense of displaced people in your work – do you agree, and can you elaborate on that?

Displacement and dislocation are certainly themes that run through these poems. In part this preoccupation with being out-of-place stems from my own personal experiences as someone who has grown up in a great variety of places, cultures, and countries. Our family moved frequently when I was younger and as an adult, I have continued to be somewhat rootless, moving every few years for work or graduate school. And yet, in writing and thinking about *personal* exile and displacement, these separations from persons, places, languages, and moments I have loved, I have found that the desire to reconnect, return, and reconstruct is actually quite *universal* and common in our increasingly destabilized and fractured modern society. One does not need to leave a country or language behind to feel this sense of longing, but can experience displacement within the isolation of urban living, in the compartmentalization of what we do for work, or within the seemingly insurmountable divide between where we are now and where we long to be. Perhaps at the root of this is our fear of losing “home,” whether “home” is a physical location, a configuration of people, a spiritual moment, or an emotional space. We all long for “home” and try to salvage what we can through memory and elegy. While these poems often begin in concrete moments where some aspect of “home” is in jeopardy, these poems try to move beyond the sphere of personal loss and threat of loss and resonate with larger and often more abstract versions of these anxieties. Often when the “home” we seek no longer exists in this physical world, we must build again in world of words on the page.

Your bio suggests you grew up in places as distinct as Vancouver, Saudi Arabia and Taiwan. Do you consider yourself Canadian? Does nationality even matter when it comes to poetry?

Although I've stopped consciously thinking about nationality and citizenship when I write, my writing does remain deeply influenced by the many years I spent in Saskatchewan. The long open roads, the high vaulted skies, the seemingly endless flat prairie horizons, and the cold that crept in through thick clothes, windows, and doors every winter—all these things find a place in the work, cement themselves as part of a world from which ideas and poems spring forth. I count myself lucky and blessed to have grown up in a place and time before the internet was all pervasive, without ubiquitous Gameboys and Xboxes, with ample time and opportunity to be outside. We camped in summer and traveled back roads to visit friends year round. Sometimes we'd stop at the edge of a gravel farm road and watch the stars overhead, thousands upon thousands, and the blue-purple curve of the Northern Lights bending in some astral breeze. What does it mean to be a Canadian writer? I don't really know, but if it has anything to do with a love of the land and a proximity to the natural world, perhaps I am a Canadian writer. I don't there's a clear “check one” approach to determining one's nationality. The more we travel and immerse ourselves in new places, languages, and cultures, the more complicated such determinations become. The country of the heart has no clear borders, no lines of demarcation. When I write there are Canadian influences no doubt, but also many things I have gleaned from the culture and language of Taiwan and China, from my experiences as a computer programmer, and from the countless interactions and conversations I have had with other travelers on my way. Hong Liu Bin, a Chinese poet-in-exile, once said, “The poet himself is a China” and I think perhaps this is the reality of 21st century nationality – we don't “belong” to countries anymore, rather we build them within ourselves. So in some respects, I carry a China, a Taiwan, a Canada, and wherever else I go within myself. Each is a country in my own image. Each is lost and found again on the page.

I assume you're a fan of Jack Kerouac based on “For Sal Paradise, Lost in America.” Is that correct? And what other writers have proved to be an influence?

Confession: I didn't actually read Kerouac's *On the Road* until I was well into my MFA, so in this respect always hesitate when people ask if I'm a fan of Kerouac's work. I think I am, but it might just be that I loved the way the novel captured much of the same wanderlust that runs through my own family. My

father's father rode the rails during the Great Depression as a young man looking for work. My father traveled through many countries and regions throughout his life, partly for work, partly for research, and often just for the joy of seeing old places. We were always moving. By land, by air, by sea.

My father was a firm believer in road trips and we spent many summers out camping, traveling cross-country, and touring forgotten places. I was also an active Scout and enjoyed the opportunities it provided to journey with only what we could carry on our backs. Even now I find myself driving long distances across country when it might be simpler to fly. Even in Los Angeles, I like to wander the city at night on foot. The open spaces and the quiet unknown corners of the world continue to fascinate me. When I read Kerouac's novel, I knew I recognized something familiar: a love of the open road, of possibilities, of leaving things behind. The poem grows out of that—of being nowhere and everywhere at once. Of being lost and in awe of the world.

Among the list of other writers who have influenced me, I would happily include Philip Levine and Li-Young Lee, as well as the writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah in the King James translation of the Bible. My first encounter with contemporary American poetry was through Levine's *New Selected Poems*. I recall that first moment as I stood in a used bookstore thumbing its pages and was struck by the perfect balance between image, lyric, and narrative captured in a simple condensed language. I had just returned from Taiwan and was lost as to how to write poetry again. I knew nothing of contemporary poetry and poets and yet when I read "Letters for the Dead," I knew something special was happening in that poem and I wanted to find a way to write like that. To find beauty in the physical evidence of the world, the small forgotten artifacts and signs of our passing. Later, a friend introduced me to Li-Young Lee's work, and I was struck this time by the way the spiritual and the physical combine, how the lyric text is made flesh, and again, the poem can be pared down to a powerful configuration of word, image, and a moment upon which everything hinges. Over the years, I've been inspired by other great poets and books of poetry: Dylan Thomas, Czeslaw Milosz, Jane Kenyon, Mark Strand, Jon Pineda, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Larry Levis, Pablo Neruda, and many more. I have also found inspiration in Nicolas Bouvier's *The Japanese Chronicles*, a rare piece of travel writing which blends personal narrative, Japanese history, and translated classical poetry. Andre Achiman's essays on exile and identity have also been immensely helpful as I've unpacked and interrogated the ideas of exile, home, and return.