



[CONTRIBUTOR CONVERSATIONS \(HTTPS://THEADROITJOURNAL.ORG/CATEGORY/CONTRIBUTOR-CONVERSATIONS/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/category/contributor-conversations/)

APRIL 20, 2020

CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTRIBUTORS: EDGAR KUNZ

by [BEN BARTU \(HTTPS://THEADROITJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/BEN-BARTU/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/author/ben-bartu/)





Edgar Kunz is the author of the poetry collection *Tap Out* (Mariner / Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), a *New York Times* New & Noteworthy book. Originally from New England, Edgar lives in Baltimore, Maryland, where he teaches at Goucher College and in the low-residency Newport MFA. He is a graduate of Vanderbilt University's MFA program and has received fellowships and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the MacDowell Colony, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and Stanford University, where he was a Wallace Stegner Fellow. He is working on a book of poems about love and late capitalism.

I first read the work of Edgar Kunz when I was twenty years old, just halfway through my time in undergrad. I stumbled across his poem, "My Father at 23, on the Highway Side of an Overpass Fence," on *Narrative* and was taken aback.

*The details always the same.
Salt wind tearing at his jacket.
Bootheels dug deep*

*in the chainlink. The two doses
slipped under his tongue
at a friend of a friend's party*

*and the coming-to
blinking at a half-lit stretch
of the Long Island Expressway*

The stanzas come on quickly, the imagery clear and strikingly spare.

*He would call me down
into the bachelor pad he made
of our basement — ratty couch,
knob-dial TV, mini-fridge
he bartered a tiling job for
stocked with Narragansett —*

*and tell me again about the fence,
the wind, the semis pitching
into the dark.*

I loved this poem so much I kept a handwritten copy of it for years (I do this with many poems I can't do without), long before *Tap Out* was released, but so that when it was, I knew the name Edgar Kunz very well.

I remember reading somewhere once that Bill Callahan's lyrics were "so good that when you heard them, they made you wish you thought of them first." That's how I feel about this poem, and much of Edgar's other work. But I couldn't have thought of it first, given the extremely autobiographical nature of his writing. No one but Edgar Kunz can write an Edgar Kunz poem, and reading *Tap Out*, it shows.

Talking with him on the phone, I asked Edgar if there was anything he'd never been asked before about his book that he'd like to get as a question. He couldn't think of anything, but he did have an observation—after being on bookshelves for just about a year now, dozens of reviews have come out for *Tap Out*, and, without fail, they all seem to say the same thing—"gritty."

After our talk, I did a quick grit dig on Google, and I'm afraid it's true. Time and again, *Tap Out's* grit is emphasized as one of its primary characteristics as a book of poems. It's true; the poetry comes from a voice that often feels weathered, hardened by years or experience. But there is also a supreme tenderness to

these poems. They are full of characters who aren't always easy, who aren't always seen in their best light. Characters in a world crafted through time, care, and hard work. That's what I think of when I think of *Tap Out*.

Benjamin Bartu: The poems in *Tap Out*—it feels like they're in the same room with you when you're reading them. So many of the pieces have to do with physical proximity. What is the book's relationship to closeness?

Edgar Kunz: I think the book is interested in the duality of closeness. There's a care and a tenderness that's possible when in proximity with another person, but there's also a vulnerability, the potential of violence that comes from being close.

The central relationship of the book, the father and son relationship, is depicted in poems that are written at a great distance from the father. Maybe that's why the speaker feels safe enough to talk about him with the kind of tenderness that he does. There's an empathy, maybe a kind of radical empathy, that can be extended to the father, because of the distance.

Students will ask me, *How do I know when I'm ready to write about something? How do I know that I can take something that's happened in my life & put it into poetry?* There's no right answer to that. I usually say, well, when you're far enough from it emotionally that you have some detachment from it. That you can use language to try and get at the—I don't know—the complexity, the full complexity of it. I mean, the closer I am to something that's happened to me, the less nuanced of a view I can take on it. It took me a long time to be able to write about my dad. I needed that distance to let tenderness come in.

BB: One of the central themes of this collection is leaving, becoming an absence. What was the process like for you, writing worlds your narrators seek so desperately to escape?

EK: Well, the whole book is about leave-takings; it's a series of leave-takings. The father leaves, the son leaves, the neighborhood kid leaves the neighborhood he grew up in, and so the whole idea is about looking back and imagining the self into those places again. That poem, "Michael," asks the question:

*If we met up in the iced-over lot at the neighborhood's edge
we were kids in —*

[...]

Michael, what would be in between us?

CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTRIBUTORS: EDGAR KUNZ



and I think that's one of the central questions that the poems are asking: how much of the past do we really own, can we re-inhabit? What does that mean, talking about distance, right? What does that distance—that physical and temporal distance—do to our relationship with place? With people?

With class, too! I'm in a weird position now where I'm asking myself questions about class mobility, about what it means to have been of a class, and to have moved now to a different class. I'm not struggling in the way that we struggled when I was growing up. It does raise interesting points—how much do I belong to the communities I grew up in, and what does that past mean to me? There's another poem in the book, "Behind the Eyes & Shining," where the speaker's wondering what it would mean:

*if I had to reckon
with what the past asks of the present.*

These are poems of salvage. It's a lot of digging around in the self: Here's this job that I had, here's this that I have, here's this fragment of memory, and what does it all add up to now? What responsibility do I have to it? I don't know.

The book is a series of escapes—but those escapes come at a cost. They come at a cost to your identity, to your sense of where you belong.

BB: The poems of *Tap Out* are written with so specific a style and a clarity that at times I felt like I could be reading long form prose. How do the poems throughout this collection draw from narrative through-lines?

EK: When I was in workshops in grad school, everyone was saying, "Oh, I wanna resist narrative. I'm not interested in narrative," or "I wanna do anti-narrative work," and I remember thinking to myself, "I don't even know what that means!"

My brain just works in scenes and images. My poems have always involved time passing. That's where they get their energy from, and so I've always been sort of unabashedly interested in narrative and so unabashedly interested in prose. That's where a lot of the good narrative work is going on. For a while I didn't even mean to write interconnected poems. But once a handful of poems got started around a certain subject, or a couple different figures or landscapes, then other poems just sort of arrived out of that obsession. Once there was a density to them I recognized—well, I don't even think it was conscious, in a lot of ways—they were just the poems that I needed to write. And it just so happened that they coalesced around a narrative or a set of narratives. So it's neither something I tried to do nor something that I resisted.

Then, in the later stages of putting the book together, I embraced it. I had all these poems, and I needed to figure out how to make a cohesive book—that's the only point in the process where I wondered what poems still needed to be written. You know, if I was going to treat this as more or less a narrative project, then what gaps needed filling in? And so I had to write maybe four or five more poems so that some of the arcs in the book felt like they started somewhere and ended somewhere.

BB: The sequencing of the poems in *Tap Out* feels particularly curated. The order the poems appear in seems of vital importance to how a reader might understand the book as a whole. How did you go about the process of organizing the poems as you did?

EK: I've got an amazing editor, Jenny Xu, at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and she had infinite patience with me, ordering and reordering. We bounced a lot of ideas off each other. I remember this really long phone call—I was at MacDowell in New Hampshire and I had the final manuscript due date looming. I had tried out different orders and sent them to her, and then we were on the phone forever, talking about where to move one or two poems! Just to get it to lock into place *exactly* in the way that we envisioned it working best.

I feel really proud of how the book is built. It's in seven sections, weirdly. Originally I didn't want any sections! I thought it should just be relentless, we should just move from one poem to the next to the next. But the way it worked out, I don't know. It felt like I needed to give the reader a little time to breathe. And I think the intro-poem and outro-poem are doing important work. It's not what I initially envisioned, but it does sort of feel—in some numinous way—right.

And I credit Jenny enormously for that. What's funny is I don't even think people read books of poems like that! That's part of the joy of encountering a book of poems: you can read it any way you want. I mean someone might just open to the middle and read a couple poems, then decide to come back to it later, you know? We spend all this time trying to get the order exactly right, but people will read the book however they want. But I did want to make it so that if a person started at the beginning, and then made it all the way through, they would have a full experience. And they would encounter the poems in a way that made the most sense to me in terms of progression.

BB: Labor of all kinds is featured throughout this collection. If it isn't foregrounded, it's situated at the periphery of the poems, in the form of window washers, house painters, social workers. What is labor's place in the poems you create?

EK: A poem I loved early on was Seamus Heaney's "[Digging](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47555/digging)," in which he's talking about the inheritance he feels, the inheritance of a certain kind of labor. He says,



Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Then he's thinking about his father, and that sod in Ireland, and he says something like, "I have no spade to follow men like them," after this long, striking description of work and the human dignity of that work and the dignity of elevating it in poetry. He says, "I have no spade to follow men like them," and then he returns to the image he started with and says,

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.

I just remember reading that poem and thinking, "God. This is speaking to me so clearly about my own sense of myself." I have no spade to follow men like them, the men in my family. They tend to work with their hands, to be laborers in some way or another, involved in industry, and I've always felt myself apart from that. There's that poem, "Natick," in the book, where the speaker talks about his father telling him he has "piano hands," and the speaker feels ashamed by that delicateness. That dexterity. I don't know. The hands are such a locus of telling. They'll tell you so much about the kind of life a person is living.

Anyway, Heaney's poem was articulating a thing I felt to be true about myself. But also, being given all this incredible, physical, monosyllabic language. It made me feel like I could get at some of the stuff I was trying to get at if I used that kind of language. So it was a poem of permission for me. It not only affirmed my content, it gave me direction—here's another person that feels the way I feel, coming from a lineage of work, physical labor, and feeling outside of that lineage, and here's the kind of language that's allowed them to make it come alive on the page.

BB: What is your relationship to labor?

EK: I've worked a bunch of weird jobs, some manual labor jobs, but always on a temporary basis, you know? It was never like, "Okay, this is what I do from now on. This is how I make my living." Just summer jobs and stuff. I always felt like a tourist.

Now I teach at a college, and my sweetheart and I just bought a house a couple years ago. It's very small, real cute, like 800 square feet. It's a source of endless projects for me. I get to work my professor job and then come home to a project. Just recently I redid the hardwood floor in our living room. That was twenty-something hours of sanding on my hands and knees. Old original pinewood floors. Plenty of mistakes were made—I'm not an expert, but I love to get lost in the work.

I think there's a part of me that really wishes writing poetry was a more physical activity. I yearn for that kind of work. Maybe because I've really internalized a certain idea of what "work" should look like. What it should cost you. How it should be embodied. I do all this intellectual work, and then I'm hungry for something to do with my hands, something to tire me out.

The house is a really good way of being productive, and I can say I'm making my house a nicer place to live. But I think that labor also serves a bunch of other functions. Along with feeling like I've done some work, I find that doing something with my hands, doing something difficult, helps me when I'm stuck on something in a poem. I'll go for a run or I'll find some project to do, I'll move some plants around in the garden. That often helps me to get unstuck, or it helps me come up with some solution to an issue I was dealing with on the page.

BB: I was stopped short by the poem "My Father at 23, on the Highway Side of an Overpass Fence," the matter-of-fact delivery of its tercets,

*Even then, I didn't believe him.
This was the man who one time
told me three punk kids

mugged him for the camo jacket
I found later in the trash.
Who said he was a SEAL,

that he was shot in Da Nang
and showed me an acne scar
on his chest.*

The way in which "My Father at 23" confronts false narratives reads as an attempt to dissect them and piece together some kind of understanding in their wake. It's a poem that can't help but resonate in particular ways in this time, under this administration. What has your own experience with false narratives been, and how has your attempt to make meaning of them guided your writing?

EK: That's one that felt like an important poem when I wrote it. Felt like new territory for me, because it's a poem that's doing a lot of thinking. Before "My Father at 23," my poems were *doing* a lot, showing people *doing* stuff, arriving at metaphors through images—but this poem has a different strategy.

There's that moment that's really the turn of the poem, where the speaker says



*I get it. In California, in the thin
middle of my twenties, I'm up
most nights on Bernal Hill*

That realization hitting me is that suddenly, now, as I'm writing, I'm the age my father was in the story he would always tell me. And so maybe now I have some insight. I think the story is bullshit. But I think what he was trying to say about his life at that time was totally true. I had just ended my marriage and I was living in San Francisco. I was staying on a friend's porch for a little while, really feeling lost, totally lost, and as has happened so many times in writing the book, feeling a kinship with my father, finding a way to make a connection with him again in a way we really never did in real life.

But it's something about those narratives...those stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. My father was someone who repeated stories so often. Whether they were true or not, it didn't matter—they would *become* true, after a while. And that's the danger, right? We start to believe our own stories, whether they're true or not.

So that poem is about finding kinship with him, through him not telling the truth. But then I had to ask myself, "Okay, well, what am I telling myself that's not true?" That's part of the project of the book, I think: looking out, sure, but then there's this imperative to look inward, too. I can look out and dig, but I have to do the work of digging in as well. I don't know what the exact word is. I didn't want to let myself off the hook.

BB: What part does *Tap Out* play in actualizing your vision of the kind of world you want to live in?

EK: I hope the book is insisting on the dignity of every person, resisting the flattening out of people. I mean, we're living in the age of social media—not exactly the place to have a nuanced dialogue about anything—and I find it's so easy to lose track of what's important. If you're not actively doing the work to get your brain back into the mode of thinking of the relationships between things as complex, then it's so easy to just sort of skate across the surface of your life. I think that puts us in a really precarious position as a culture. So what I hope the poems are doing is insisting that every human being is complex, you know, that every situation might be more complicated than we think at first. Even our own emotional realities. If you do a little bit of digging, what's actually happening isn't only what is most apparent.

This isn't particularly new territory I'm treading; there are plenty of really smart articles and thinkers that have tackled this subject. But I was surprised to find that it was manifesting so blatantly in my own life. I've taken a few small steps to try and mitigate the effects social media has on me—wanting likes, too, wanting clicks.

What's important is the poems, and these days I'm just trying to get back into writing and to get back into that original impulse that brought me so much joy and brought so much meaning to my life. You can get a little lost in chasing something, and after a while you kind of forget what it is.

BB: An early poem in *Tap Out*, titled "Again," is addressed to a father, and tells the story of the narrator's mother leaving home. It ends,

*though I won't pick up
for you anymore though
what's left is mostly
shame & damaged
light tell me lean
your head into
your shoulder whisper
into your hands*

The language is so careful here. The notion of "damaged // light," a thing in disrepair revealing further disrepair, but carrying life, really resonates with this collection. Is *Tap Out* a book of damaged light?

EK: Yeah. Yes. My dad passed last year, while the book was out. And it took me back to look at the book now. I mean, I've been on the road pretty heavily, doing a lot of tour dates, and it's been amazing—but it's also been difficult to read these poems and realize that the whole time I was writing this book, I was already grieving him. I had begun the work of grieving him a long time ago.

And so in a way, the poems—and this brings us back to distance—are an attempt to reach him before he was gone, in a way I couldn't in life. A way of making a connection with him, or maybe an idea of him. A more complex version of him than existed in the real world. And now I have this whole collection of poems that may not be entirely about him, but he's a big figure in it, and I feel proud of the version of him I was able to get down on the page. I've got [this essay up at LitHub](https://lithub.com/writing-poetry-to-find-a-writing-poetry-to-find-a-father-worth-grieving-worth-grieving/) (<https://lithub.com/writing-poetry-to-find-a-writing-poetry-to-find-a-father-worth-grieving-worth-grieving/>), and it's all about that—it's all about poetry as a space for invention, and in a way, as a space for lying. It's not memoir, not creative nonfiction, not journalism. It's a place where you get to the truth of it, not necessarily as constricted by the exact. You get to move things around in time, to put people in the room that weren't necessarily there. Because it strengthens the poem, it gets at something truer than strictly facts allow.

The essay centers around the story of my brother, who was in the army, and he was stationed up in Fort Bragg. His college girlfriend was living in Massachusetts, and so he would make trips back and forth to my house in Baltimore. My house is really small. He'd sleep on an air mattress on my kitchen floor, and one time he came over and I had just gotten the proofs of the book. He immediately started flipping through the pages, looking, looking, reading poems and asking *What's true? Is this true? Is this true?* Then he got to one poem, "[Deciding \(https://theadroitjournal.org/issue-twenty-two-edgar-kunz-the-adroit-journal/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/issue-twenty-two-edgar-kunz-the-adroit-journal/)," about a house fire in the neighborhood, and he said, *I remember this exactly. I remember the house burning down, I remember all of us going out together, I remember you picking up Noah and walking toward the house, saying the thing that you say in the poem, this is exactly my memory of it.*

The thing is, I had made up that poem, more or less. The house fire did happen, but it was a block away. He would have been two years old, maybe, too young to remember. And I went out alone, I didn't even go out with them. So my brother identified this poem as being the "one true poem" in the book, when actually it was one of the poems in which I took some liberties with time and characters. But my brother, he identified the feeling of the poem as being true. As being something that he remembers having experienced. Even though the facts were distorted. He was like—*Oh! This is true*—and I was like *Well, I think so!*

But those aren't the *facts*. The facts are, probably, you were asleep.

* * *

[BEN BARTU \(HTTPS://THEADROITJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/BEN-BARTU/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/author/ben-bartu/)


BENJAMIN BARTU IS A POET & WRITER STUDYING HUMAN RIGHTS & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY. HE IS THE WINNER OF THE BLOOD ORANGE REVIEW'S FIRST ANNUAL POETRY CONTEST, JUDGED BY JERICO BROWN. HIS WRITING HAS ALSO APPEARED IN THE ADROIT JOURNAL, THE ESTHETIC APOSTLE, CATHEXIS NORTHWEST PRESS, & ELSEWHERE. AN ASSOCIATE EDITOR AT PALETTE POETRY, HE CAN BE FOUND ON TWITTER @ALAMPNAMEDBEN.

 **NO COMMENTS YET**

CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTRIBUTORS: EDGAR KUNZ



LEAVE A REPLY

 [\(https://theadroitjournal.org/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/)

[SUBMIT \(HTTPS://THEADROITJOURNAL.ORG/GENERAL-SUBMISSIONS/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/general-submissions/)

[CURRENT ISSUE \(HTTPS://THEADROITJOURNAL.ORG/ISSUE-THIRTY-EIGHT/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/issue-thirty-eight/)

[BLOG \(HTTPS://THEADROITJOURNAL.ORG/BLOG/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/blog/)

[SAY HELLO \(HTTPS://THEADROITJOURNAL.ORG/SAY-HELLO/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/say-hello/)

[ABOUT \(HTTPS://THEADROITJOURNAL.ORG/ABOUT/\)](https://theadroitjournal.org/about/)

[f](http://facebook.com/adroitjournal)_(<http://facebook.com/adroitjournal>) [t](http://twitter.com/adroitjournal)_(<http://twitter.com/adroitjournal>)

[in](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-adroit-journal)_(<https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-adroit-journal>)

[@](https://www.instagram.com/adroitjournal)_(<https://www.instagram.com/adroitjournal>) [t](http://adroitjournal.tumblr.com/)_(<http://adroitjournal.tumblr.com/>)

Copyright © 2010-2019, The Adroit Journal. All rights reserved. ISSN 2577-9427.

NOTE: Advertisements and sponsorships contribute to hosting costs. Thank you for your support.