

# HARPUR PALATE

Literary Journal

## “THIS DRIFTY STAGE OF LIFE,” A CONVERSATION WITH EDGAR KUNZ

In his debut book, *Tap Out* (Mariner/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), Edgar Kunz explores the machinations of manhood, answering how the self can be encountered in moments of closeness, violence, and escape. Kunz is a master in metaphor, tone, and *truth*. His poems dig into the celebration of working-class life and the struggle to accept the human condition: wherever I go, there I am.

In conversation, Kunz relays that the speaker has an “impulse to salvage the father” and the poems recreate a bond that never was. Kunz’s speaker is actively repulsed, yet simultaneously desperate for their father, who is only absent in body, not mind. In his poem, “Close,” the speaker almost hits a building while his father teaches him how to drive. In a physical confrontation near the bumper of the vehicle, the speaker

reflects: "He's still beautiful, my father. Fluid. / Powerful. His bare forearms corded with muscle, bristling in the cold. Yes, / he's drunk. Yes, I have already begun the life- / long work of hating him, a job / that will carve me down to almost / nothing." The father's work-hardened body is a place of meditation and contrast in *Tap Out*, in particular, the father's hands, which grace the cover of the collection in facsimile form.

In this interview, Kunz discusses his progression as a poet, having a bad memory, his relationship with his father, and more. Some of the conversation alludes to Kunz's visit to Professor Tina Chang's graduate poetry seminar at Binghamton University in Fall 2021.



*Tap Out* (Mariner/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

CD: Thanks for much for doing this. I loved your work. I'm actually from Connecticut.

EK: Oh, no kidding. Whoa. Where are you from?

CD: Newtown, Connecticut.

EK: Okay, yeah.

CD: I lived in New Haven and that's where I started writing and everything.

EK: Yeah, my family moved to Connecticut when I was in middle school. We moved to Manchester.

CD: Oh, really? My wife lived in Manchester, so I used to visit her when we started dating.

EK: No kidding.

CD: Yeah.

EK: That's wild. I graduated from Manchester high school class of 2006.

CD: We got married in South Windsor just two weeks ago and we stayed in Manchester. I asked her to read your "Vows" poem right before we got married.

EK: Oh, no kidding.

CD: Yeah, I wanted to tell her I was feeling the same kind of way.

EK: Beautiful, that's so sweet man. Thanks for sharing that.

CD: Yeah, I got a kick out of the I-84 and Bridgeport references.

EK: Exactly. I try to sneak them in. Listen, I'm such a such a sucker for a proper noun. The particularity of a brand name or a place name or a highway or whatever, for me it gives it a kind of texture--the texture of the real that it wouldn't otherwise have.

CD: Yeah, I feel like a lot of times poets try to be universal and don't mention places or times or even cell phones.

EK: I know, I think that's kind of a mistake. Honestly, I'm trying to move a little bit more in that direction in my work. I have a poem that I'm working on where I'm riding on a train and there's a little girl that's taking pictures of herself with her phone and she's swiping through different filters. There's the filter with the rainbow ribbon coming out of her mouth and then the devil horns. She swipes through different

versions of herself. It ended up being a pretty cool metaphor for how we try on different ideas of ourselves, and then we settle on one.

Anyway, they're all these good opportunities for metaphor, and all this stuff that at least I have tended to think, don't really belong in poems, like the technological world, well, it's actually pretty ripe, pretty fertile ground.

CD: Have you ever heard of “Snapchat dysmorphia?”

EK: No, I don't know what that is.

CD: It's when people get surgery to look like their faces do on filters.

EK: Oh, my God. Yeah, because so much of how they think of themselves and see themselves is wrapped up in these technologies. Right. That's really intense.

CD: Yeah, well, you've already kind of hinted a bunch of the questions I had.

EK: Oh, cool. Yeah.

CD: The setting was one, but I do want to ask this one first. A couple weeks ago when you when you spoke to our class, you mentioned that poetry should be “writing towards the difficulty.” I was wondering what difficulty you are writing towards recently. You mentioned the technology stuff and filters, but just in general, what difficulty are you trying to get to today?

EK: Yeah, in *Tap Out* the difficulties are pretty clear and dramatic. These big milestones in the speaker's life, which in a lot of ways line up with the big milestones of my life. We've got the struggle through a difficult childhood, because the relationship with the dad that goes poorly. And then an escape from the hometown and feeling pretty drifty. Getting into a serious relationship and getting out of that relationship. Really quickly moving from the East coast to the West coast. There are these various arcs that I think made that book cohere in a pretty straightforward way and in pretty narrative way.

The poems I'm writing now have way more to do with the later poems in *Tap Out* than they do with even the first three quarters of the book. For example, I'm working

on a poem now that's talking about moving back East from California and still having that longing for a place that you've left, you know, that you can't stop talking about it, you're obsessed with it. California. You find other people that moved to the East coast from California and it's like "God, isn't it so great out there?" and they're like, "Yes! I miss it every day!"

And then, one day, you wake up in the middle of your life and you realize, actually, you've built a much more beautiful and fulfilling life in the new place than you ever had in the old place.

Stuff like that, where the poem isn't as dramatic. It's not as, you know, here's this really charged scene between a father and a son or between two lovers or whatever. It's more like encountering a new version of yourself. There's slow shifts that happen without you realizing. In a way, maybe more mature poems. Less noisy, more subtle. Teasing out what the dramas are exactly can be more challenging because they're not so obvious.

CD: Right, so do you think you had that one story you had to tell, and now you're a poet without an obvious story?

EK: Yeah, I guess so. It does feel that way. On the one hand that's scary and on the other hand, it's so freeing. I felt after a while like I was working in a very small dark room working on *Tap Out*. Even when I got to the point writing the book where I was writing some of those later poems that felt a little closer to the time of life that I was in. After, you know, around the time of the book's publication, it felt like I was limited in what I could talk about.

I was writing poems *toward* finishing the book, right, so you're toiling away and toiling away, and doing everything in service of how can I make this book the most fulfilled that it can be? Then the book comes out, and, what do you write now?

I think the temptation for a lot of poets is to figure out another project. Okay, here's my book that tells the story of how I came to be where I am, you know, the sort of *bildungsroman* idea. I think a lot of us end up writing that book even when we're not trying to. The first book tells the tale of the life and then, the second book, I feel like a lot of poets are like, okay, I'm going to write about...Goethe. I'm going to write all these Goethe poems. Or, I'm going to write sonnets. I'm only going to write sonnets for five

years in my life and that's going to help give structure to my writing life, right? I resisted doing that. I don't know why exactly. I guess just out of stubbornness.

What I've done instead is not that much writing, but the poems that I have written have all surprised me with what they've been about. I mean, the forms that they've taken. You know the next book might end up being a little more haphazard. I don't know. Maybe less cohesive. But it's been fun to not know what's coming next.

CD: Could you compare your experiences with where you're at now to where you were with no first book publication yet.

EK: Yeah, do you mean in the practice of writing?

CD: Yeah, how you feel about it? I'm in that pre-first book publication phase right now so I can really relate to telling my story first. I'm already getting so sick of writing about my college days. I'm also writing about *now* and it's hard. But I'm excited by it. I do fantasize about after the first book, what it'll be like. So, how do you feel right now?

EK: It's wide open, you know. Wide open in a way that it never really felt to me at any point in my writing life. First of all, I came into poetry thinking it would help me with my songwriting. I had these dreams of being a songwriter.

CD: Oh, really?

EK: Absolutely. In fact, when I went to community college, I took my first ever poetry class with this great teacher Steve Straight, who has since retired. I went in writing song lyrics and asking him questions basically about how can I make my song lyrics better. Over the course of that semester, I slowly caught the bug. At some point, a switch flipped, and I thought, you know what, actually I want to do this way more obscure thing.

Maybe, on some level I realized that I had a lot more potential as a poet than I did as a singer songwriter person, of course, there are a bazillion. Just for whatever reason, my temperament, my skills, and my knack for whatever I have a knack for steered me in that direction.

But anyway, that's kind of a long a side note. I think from the moment that I started writing poems I felt I had some particular territories to explore. I need to make sense of my relationships with people I grew up with. I need to make sense of my relationship to home and what it means to leave, and can you ever go back and if you do go back, will you belong in the way that you that you did before. Those issues were very loud, for me, and demanded to be explored. They felt essential. Like, you need to these sort out for yourself to establish yourself as a person in the world. So, you better get writing about it.

Now that I've done the first book, I'm happy with it and I'm proud of it in a lot of ways. I don't feel the same pressure, or I don't feel the same urgency. That is strange because that urgency is what has motivated me for the last 10 years. The twin urgencies of, I want to get these poems right and I want to make something that I can share with the world. And also, I feel slightly competitive with other poets. I think that's partly a function too of being on social media. You see other people publish their poems and you see a friend publish a great poem in a great journal and you're like, God, I better get back to the writing desk and let that motivate me. You know, I need to try to catch up.

Not just in terms of accomplishments or whatever, but in terms of developing as an artist. I can see that they're doing something really cool that I should try too. They're on another level. I want to try to get to that level. I do still feel that way reading other people's poems sometimes. I feel like, wow, I've got work to do, but I don't still have that same motivation to tell the first story. In that way, I'm kind of adrift.

CD: Well, the most recent poem you shared with us, I think it had to do with your neighbors.

EK: They were squatting. My neighbors were squatting.

CD: That poem really stuck with me, and it did feel like it was from a completely different writer than the poems in *Tap Out*.

EK: Oh, no kidding. Very cool. I'm interested to know if you have some insights about how it's different. It's hard for me to look at new poems and think anything other than, well, here I am again writing in my same voice and talking about some of the same stuff. Is it a tone difference?

CD: It felt more relaxed, more hopeful.

EK: Oh, cool.

CD: It felt like someone was peering out their window and they had all the time in the world. In a good way, like you're mentioning how these other ones are urgent. They're really stripped down to the bare essentials and the other one felt like anything was important enough to talk about. The time in the house. The little phone call that didn't go anywhere really. Yeah, so it felt, not necessarily like a different writer, but a poem written 10 years apart.

EK: That's really helpful actually. Thanks for saying that.

CD: Definitely.

EK: Yeah, a more quiet urgency. And we're more ruminative, something more relaxed. There's more time.

CD: I do have a question about your title. Does the speaker “tap out?”

EK: Yeah, I think so. I think over and over again. I think that's how the speaker in these poems has learned to cope. I mean the first success that the speaker experiences, the central difficulty of their life, is that they left home. They left and left young and left brothers behind, left people they love behind, and that ended up being what saved them. The “tapping out” in that case is self-reinforcing. When things get difficult, what does the speaker do? Well, they dip out. They go and they do something else. They reinvent themselves in another place. They get involved in some other thing. That's been really true to my experience as well.

Where did the speaker learn that? It's hard to say, but when you look at the trajectory of the father in the book, you get the sense that the father taps out in kind of a different way, taps out by staying still and stagnating. The speaker ironically ends up doing a similar thing over and over again, but through movement, through motion.

CD: You've lived all across the country. Did moving ever change the way you wrote? Did being in different settings ever change your writing?



EK: I think living away from home really helped me to focus the lens on home. I've never been able to write about a place that I've lived until I've moved away and gotten a little bit of perspective or something.

I have a theory about memory and it's that if you remember something too well it's really hard to have the necessary looseness to write about it well. So the good Lord has blessed me with a terrible memory, really, really, shockingly bad memory, and I think that frees me up to write about things. It frees me up to be loose and more inventive than I would otherwise feel like I had licensed to if I could remember it better.

CD: That's so cool.

EK: Yeah. I think having too good of a memory is a bit of a curse. Not that I would know. I'm imagining that it might be.

CD: It might actually help. Who knows?

EK: This is the brain I have, so it's what I work with. But in any case, another part of your question has to do with has any place changed the way that I write. Well, a funny anecdote when I moved to Nashville to go to grad school, I was meeting new people pretty often and they'd be like, "Hey, what do you do?" and I'm like, "Oh, I'm a writer," and they're like "Oh, yeah. Cool. Have I heard anything that you've written?" And they meant on the radio because everyone in Nashville is a songwriter. The idea that I was writing anything other than songs was totally foreign to most people in that town. Then, of course, it's like my early ambitions come back to haunt me. "I know, I'm not writing songs. Shit."

Anyway, more than places changing the way that I wrote, it's encountering people, other writers, that live there that changed the way I think about writing. And teachers. I've had some good luck with having some excellent and tough teachers that have really shaped the way I think about what a poem can do.

But, yeah, did I move to California and start writing California poems? Actually, no. I moved away from California and then I couldn't stop writing about California. There's that built-in delay for me. It's always been true, who knows why.

CD: You’ve mentioned poetry is an opportunity for “radical imaginative empathy,” which I love and wanted to ask, when were you able to start writing about your father? Did it take a while, or were you doing it all along?

EK: Before he died my dad and I were estranged for a long time. I mean the very occasional phone call or voicemail or whatever, but very rare. We’re talking a period of five years or more where we weren’t in touch or a part of each other’s lives at all. I think that distance helped. I also think it hurt me deeply as a person and it made it so that that was a subject that demanded exploration and poems.

To what you said about poetry being a radical imaginative empathetic space, I think I didn’t have much of a choice but to try to make a space in which I could encounter my dad and imagine what he was going through. Imagine that kind of closeness between us, which is something that I wanted, and I think he was not capable of. This isn’t exactly true, but in a way, the poems made a closeness between us possible that we couldn’t have in real life.

CD: In the collection’s first poem, “After the Hurricane,” you’re almost filling his shoes as he’s near the Connecticut river.

EK: Yeah, obviously, that’s all made up. That’s all imagined. I knew he was living in a van, and it was over the winter. Everything else was a kind of collage of things that I knew about him or would be likely to be around him or something. That was just me, sketching a scene and wanting to live in that scene for a little bit.

CD: I think it’s so interesting the speaker doesn’t imagine themselves there. They imagine the scene as if they were a squirrel or somebody nearby.

EK: Well, in the last poem of the book that scene is sketched again. It’s in this poem, “Behind the Eyes, & Shining,” which takes its title from a Larry Levis poem, “Winter Stars.” He says, “If you can think of the mind as a place continually / Visited, a whole city placed behind / The eyes, and shining. I can imagine, now, it’s end—”. He’s talking about his father deteriorating toward the end of his life, so it really felt right in this context.

The poem [Kunz’s “Behind the Eyes, & Shining”] goes like this: “If I could admit / it was a scam: my father’s voice soft on the machine. Sober. / Asking me to call back. If I

had to admit why I won't. If I had to reckon / with what the past asks of the present. If I am here / in his van. Stale cigarillo smoke and the heavy redolence / of the body. Windows fogged over. Blankets damp with rain. / If I squat against the wheelwell, and look at as quiet hands, / and do not turn away. If they tremble. If they're still."

The speaker is imagining being in that scene that's sketched in the first poem. Maybe the book is a journey toward being able, being brave enough, to put yourself in that place even just in a poem. And this is before my dad had died. He was still alive. So, the book ends, I think, on a hopeful note of connection. When he passed, I was obviously really sad and devastated. But the thing that I was saddest about was that the possibility of reconnection was also gone.

CD: I know that word "if" does a whole lot in that last couplet. It's so beautiful. Was that poem the obvious ending to the book for you?

EK: I kind of wanted the book to end on "Interim" at first. That's the bitcoin poem.

CD: I love that poem.

EK: I'm so proud of this poem.

CD: I think it's the only bitcoin poem I've ever read.

EK: Hey, I'm cornering the market.

CD: Yeah, talk about poets being averse to technology.

EK: Well, this is what we were talking about before. If I hadn't let cryptocurrency, which I really don't know that much about, into this poem, it would be a worse poem. It would be a less interesting, less full, and dynamic poem.

CD: It's a different form of machine, to the point of your whole book is looking at machines. This is today's machine, it's a computer.

EK: Exactly. I was proud of arriving at this ending. Asking the friend questions about cryptocurrency. I asked, "What happens when they're out of equations?" which is such a silly ignorant question to ask if you know anything about cryptocurrency, but the speaker doesn't. And the friend says, "It's not like that. It could go on forever," and

you get the sense that the friend is talking also about this stage of life, this really drifty stage of life that the speakers in. It could be like this forever. You could be stuck.

CD: Being comfortable being uncomfortable. There's no destination.

EK: There is no destination. Exactly.

CD: That's a lesson we've got to learn over and over again.

EK: Right, and that felt like a pretty good ending to the book to me, but I kept coming back to the problem of where to put "Behind the Eyes, & Shining." Ultimately, even in its form, it's mirroring "After the Hurricane" with these long couplets. That scene is sketched again, the one of the father in the van, except this time the speaker is there too in this kind of imagining. You know, *if...if* I went, what would it be like? It's a negative description by saying *if* and then talking about it. You're making it real. That ended up feeling right. Even if it's a bit book-endy, you know.

CD: Yeah, it's got a neat ending and I love that. The actual micro-ending is of the hands. You don't know if they're trembling or if they're still. The hands are so central to the collection, as the most sensitive parts of our bodies, but also the things we interact with the world, and mess things up, with. And to fix things.

EK: Yeah. They reveal us to the world, the kind of life we're living.

CD: Right. I have piano hands.

EK: Me too, man. What can we do?

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

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