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on *Tap Out*, poems by Edgar Kunz

reviewed by Will Brewbaker

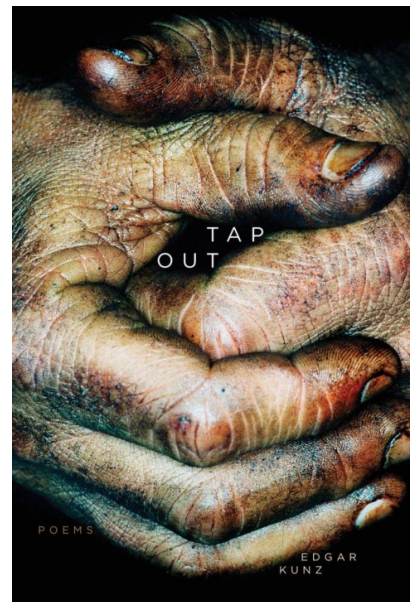
Perhaps the hands are too obvious a place to begin. “Too obvious,” maybe, because the cover of Edgar Kunz’s *Tap Out* — the poet’s debut collection — offers an arresting photograph of a pair of dirty, grease-stained hands, folded as if in prayer or contemplation.

But this photograph — like the verse it precedes — is a precise, intentional choice. Indeed, the image serves as a kind of visual epigraph for the book. In these poems, the photograph assures us, Kunz will eschew observation’s safe distance, and will instead zoom in closely — so close you can see the dirt-caked wrinkles of an aged thumb — offering portrait after portrait of those individuals (himself included) who populate his world.

Which brings us back to the hands: those humble loci of work and love and friendship that become, in Kunz’s poems, metonymic for their owners. “There’s no one left to see his hands, / lifting from the engine bay,” Kunz writes in “My Father at 49, Working the Night Shift at B&R Diesel.” After comparing his father’s hands to “roots dripping river mud,” Kunz goes on in an excess of description:

... Thumb knuckle-

thick and white as a grub where the box-



cutter bit. Split nail grown back
 scalloped and crooked. The stitch-
 puckered skin.

These lines offer a glimpse into the tenacity of Kunz's prosody. The second excerpted line is a metered cocktail — trochees morph first into a single iamb, then out to a smooth anapest — until the lilting music halts at the sight of the “Split nail grown back.” The four consecutive beats suggest something about the relationship between Kunz's ear and his eye: yes, there are times when language should sing, but there are also images too harsh for meter.

Kunz's own hands exist — as his own self exists — in relation to his father's. A short poem entitled “Natick” opens with the speaker and his father driving together in silence. The fragmented phrases build until the poem ends in memory:

When he held up his hands to mine, palm
 to palm. Nail beds packed with grease. Knuckles more scar
 than skin. When he said I had piano hands,
 and I was ashamed, and hid them in the pockets of my coat.

Kunz resists, in these spare lines, the temptation to draw some larger moral from the moment, and instead allows what's left unsaid — between his father and the speaker, between the lines themselves — to hover at the edges of meaning. Something about work, yes. Something about masculinity, certainly. But Kunz doesn't use this memory as rhetorical argument — he simply tells a story.

This impulse — to resist the declarative “message” inchoate in Kunz's memories — is laudable. In the eponymous poem, for example, a poet with less subtlety might have turned the lines into a lesson about the dangers of letting “boys be boys” — portrayed, in this case, as a group of boys wrestling each other in a yard while one of them, Daryl, passes his gun around and jokingly pantomimes suicide.

“We were vicious,” Kunz admits in the poem’s first words. But the poem has more to tell than just that. After listing different wrestling moves — “The Texas Cloverleaf,” “The Cross- / Face Chicken Wing,” each move a poem in and of itself — Kunz relays the moment before submission, just after the speaker is commanded to “tap out”:

That sour-hot breath in your ear
and knowing you won’t give in, you won’t give him
the satisfaction, even when it hurts more
than anything, more than your dad’s belt
blistering your backside, more than the night
when Daryl put that gun in his mouth and the sound
of it woke the whole block, so much you grit
your teeth against the pain, sharp kneecap
bearing down on your chest, elbow torqued
past its limit, and you swear you could bust out
of yourself and look down at your body, helpless
and small and trembling, press your mouth
to your own ear and whisper, *Not you. Not yet.*

Here, the sustained syntax mirrors the moment’s ever-increasing panic. As the speaker searches for comparisons to describe his physical pain, the poem veers — as if by accident — into elegy and away from linear temporal sequence. What had been, just lines before, an immature joke about suicide becomes, out of nowhere, a tragic reality.

Once Kunz has wrestled his poem back into the instigating memory, we find him near an ecstatic moment (literally, from the Greek *ekstasis*, “standing outside oneself”). But, of course, with Daryl’s as-yet-unfired gunshot still ringing in our ears, we can no longer hear those last two commands as a plea to resist only the literal “tapping out” — and suddenly the book’s eponymous charge shifts in tone.

This ability — to transmogrify a familiar phrase or word into something unknown — stands as one of Kunz’s major talents. In “Workbench,” Kunz defamiliarizes the simple act of hammering. “Then [I] kept hammering,” he writes. “My hand going numb, starting to

feel // like someone else’s hand.” The clever enjambment propels this moment as, briefly, the speaker’s hand simultaneously goes numb *and* begins “to feel” — until we follow the enjambed line through the white space and, in the poem’s final line, a simple simile transforms the sentence. In a book so concerned with hands, the disassociation between the speaker and his hand grows into a larger fissure — between present and past, adulthood and childhood, even *poiesis* and physical labor.

In “After the Attempt” (another poem about hammering), the speaker addresses an unnamed “you” in the wake of what we assume was a suicide attempt. Kunz writes:

Once, hungover
 on a gut-and-remodel job
 in Grafton, you cracked the root
 of your nose with your claw
 hammer’s backswing.

You stood very still after,
 watching your blood scatter
 on the plywood floor, alien
 and bright as coins
 from a distant country.

Though this poem appears, at first, free of the hand motif, the third excerpted line interacts with this theme in new, dark ways. Just as the poem’s addressee “cracked” his nose open, Kunz cracks open the phrase “claw / hammer,” slicing it in half with a violent enjambment. This line break shifts the poem, momentarily, into the realm of the surreal: the “you” has hurt himself with his “claw” — a primal transformation of the hand that has rung throughout the pages like a repeated chord.

The surreal imagery continues in the final lines, when the sight of the blood “scatter[ing]” leads to a simile as unexpected as any in the collection. In Kunz’s transformative imagination, even blood undergoes a kind of poetic alchemy, becoming first “alien,” and then a currency of rare and precious value.

For all of *Tap Out*’s obsession with childhood, the poems grow up with their poet. Daryl, Ant, and the other boyhood friends drift off the stage and are replaced, primarily, by a failed marriage that occupies much of the book’s latter half. Halfway through “Dry Season” — the most successful of the post-relationship poems — the speaker recalls his last night with his wife:

... the night

before I left for good I slept

on the living room floor

and she came out shivering

and sobbing asking me

to hold her just for a minute and I

said no I said no because so

many times before I had said

yes and not meant it and just

like that I knew I was

small and cruel and moved

out across the placid bay ...

These lines show Kunz working in a different poetic mode. Still, even without the luxury of punctuation, his ear controls the pacing. The opening and closing lines scan perfectly and, in the sixth full line, the *no / so* rhyme welds the disparate phrases together — even as the sharply- enjambed lines drive the poem on.

But the poem’s honesty deserves more praise than its craft. “I said no...and just / like that I knew I was / small and cruel” confesses the speaker. This poem recounts not just a failed marriage, but the *precise* moment that the relationship exhaled its last breath. Like much of *Tap Out*, “Dry Season” refuses simplistic renderings of complicated dynamics — and

opts instead for a vulnerability that, even at this late stage in the book, comes as a surprise.

A similar sincere posture toward relationships continues, too, in the last poem, which offers a series of unfinished hypotheticals. “If I could say it once, clearly,” laments the speaker. “If I could get it right.” This poem — entitled “Behind the Eyes, & Shining” — ends, fittingly, not just with a portrait of the speaker’s father, but with a familiar image: his father’s hands. Kunz writes:

If I squat against the wheelwell, and look at his quiet hands,
and do not turn away. If they tremble. If they’re still.

Tap Out ends in this fragmented paradox. The specific characteristics of the father’s hands — which required such extensive description early on — have faded into a single adjective: “quiet.” Nor does it seem to matter what these metonymic hands do. The moment’s import lies instead in the speaker’s reaction: whether or not he will be able to “look.”

That we don’t get the hypothetical phrase’s fulfilling clause — the *then* that might “explain” all the *if*s — doesn’t matter. We need to know only what we know already: that Edgar Kunz wants to look squarely at the “quiet hands” not just of his father but of his entire world — and, if he can bear it, “not turn away.”

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