

## Lost Expedition in Antarctica

Faster than the plunging sun might strand all eight of us  
coldly from one another, I count in my head our supplies.  
Three days. Huskies, exhausted. Sleighs, stuck. Sunset  
needles their blank eyes. Boot-spurred, they won't rise.

Why did we not, as the storm brewed yesterday, turn back?  
Meaty haunches pulse through silver fur. Dusk's last breath  
sheens the glacial sheets of wind-smooth ice  
disappearing to four horizons of white.

I try to sense something human  
in the drifts encompassing us. Tomorrow's gale  
will batter the camp, shift us inward. "Tie everything down!"  
The slicing wind preens about our fritz'd satellite radio.

I look back at Jack—his frosted red beard,  
neophyte's aplomb. He shall be first. If I wrap  
myself in his carcass, can I eke it out? Science has left  
each of us alone to ponder how to act. Plus, how'll others act?

No more maps. Have I served my dreams well?  
I trained and aimed, gave myself to the hard work, trusted.  
At base camp, no doubt, new recruits equipped and antsy  
to rush out. . .if we all succumb below the snow's crust.

— G. H. Mosson

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## Experiencing Experience in Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *The Topeka School*



“And now, to fill the void, came rage and language.”

— *The Topeka School*

In Ben Lerner's novels, we explore all three of these: language and also rage at its void—that is, the space between language and meaning, writer and reader, the poet's unfailing belief in the power of literature and his simultaneous, unshakable self-consciousness when language fails. Why is it that a single text can evoke a

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wide range of interpretations, and what does our interpretation—our experience of a text—say about who we are as people? Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* and recently released *The Topeka School* explore these questions by investigating the complicated processes of reading and reception that feed this void. The prose of these linked novels—part poetry, part literary criticism, part realist novel, and what reads like all confession—center upon a shared protagonist, Adam. In *The Topeka School*, Adam is a renowned high-school debater and reticent yet budding poet, the emotionally-troubled son of psychologists desperate to put a narrative to the complicated events their family experiences. In *Leaving the Atocha Station*, we encounter an older Adam: an isolated, anxious twenty-something who, despite being on a prestigious fellowship in Madrid intended to inform his poetry, is quickly losing faith in the power of art.

Scholars such as Nicholas Dames and Alex Gallo-Brown have suggested that *Leaving the Atocha Station*'s Adam is representative of an artist steeped too deeply in literary theory: well-educated but overly diagnostic, unable to connect with the people around him. Others, like Rebecca Walkowitz, have been drawn to the innovative way the novel presents the process of translation on the page, formally evoking polysemy and misunderstandings. What interests me, though, is the way these two components work together in both *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *The Topeka School*; I want to identify the specific way Lerner's Adam interprets the world, and investigate how this might help us find a way to crawl out of (or, alternately, live within) "the void."

In the earliest pages of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Adam expresses the self-conscious search for meaning that plagues him:

I had long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art. . . I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my