The first of the two epigraphs that introduce Michael Cross's most recently published poem, Throne (Dos Press, 2007), comes from Jack Spicer and, I think, appropriately gestures toward the kinds of concerns that make Michael's growing body of work an important counter to our new century's well-guarded (if poorly funded) sense of what poetry, counter-progressively, has come to announce. Michael wants us to hear Spicer's invocation of the absolute as both an invitation and a warning: "Once you try to embrace an absolute geometric circle the naked loss stays with you like a picture echoing." These figures (circularity, geometry, nudity, loss, echo) are at the root of what Throne, in its pulling away, drones to presence. The geometry of Spicer's baseball diamond, the nudity of Duncan's law, and the angled perfection of Lorca and Hemingway's bullfighters, dancing ever close to danger's source, seem appropriate leads for the detective work the poem demands. What I mean is that Throne's danger is also its delicacy, a brazen fusion of the object's hardest rule (law's absolute) and an enacted romantic sense of necessity, that of evacuating one's literality into the poem. This is critical, working-class expressionism, the brutality inherent in making oneself an object for writing belonging to an absolute, or tending at least to go off like an IED, sharding what the work is not. Thus thetic, Throne's first movement, blends idioms of readerly intimacy, the last line's "bon mot," with street-talk in the sun. Here's an example of law's sensuality:

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draw paren to the sun brand
as to sun I tell this guy
in water in water, bottlenecks the dynast's
hand, by bore flayed boxwood
lip to lave by lawmen's banded eyes
bunches in the hand the same as me
poised upon the polished fats a wedge
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Is there water in water? After polishing fats, is it time to eat? Circling in upon these questions (whether or not the lawman's hand will ever free itself from the neck of the bottle, how the poet becomes like that lawman, bunched and blind yet graceful) would seem a primary element of the thinking by which these movements must be crossed. The demand inherent in Cross's work is, I think, to stand at its center, to be, in a sense, that center, and
to keep looking around, trying on the poem’s costumed diction to see how it fits. The poem wears a hood, and it fits strangely. Following thetic, the poem’s second movement, sarx/pneuma, fills a bad neighborhood with “sea-foam,” enacting a scene in which the poet, drawn to images of self-defense and incarceration, wears his hoodie backwards, facing its seam:

    to vetting folks
    I seen at the carwash
    iterant’s catch at the choke
    for pleathers thins in white
    rims the place one wants a world for
    sacerdotally, at least, the seam
    in the hood I face

Do these rims keep spinning? It is not enough to note the distance, one Cross repeatedly cultivates, between street-level and ivory tower discourses and dictions (sacerdotally, anomos, vulpine captivating a poetic space in which pleather and a carwash will also figure) as ironic. We are not here being treated to yet another experiment in the now exhausted, and usually reconciliatory, staged crash between entrenched vocabularies. Rather, romantically, we are faced with a strangeness more genuine, a necessary homelessness by which the objects one confronts come to composition such that, in speaking them, we record the suffering to which Spicer’s epigram alludes. Tending toward absolution, one finds that one’s vehicle, the available vehicles, are filthy. Responsive to Throne’s imposed force, a black geometry made delicate, one faces “the subject’s front to come,” a temporality by whose law dead things desire commerce with the living. What Cross’s work forces me to realize, as at the opening of Throne’s final movement, nunc age, is that, in the poem’s midst, I have eaten “what feeds me to ashes.”