

*OPENING DAY*

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2008

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Van Hooser, David. *Opening Day*. Master of Arts (English – Creative Writing), August 2008, 42 pp., works cited, 9 titles.

Although I've read and written poetry for my own pleasure for about twenty years now, I've only seriously studied and written poetry on a consistent basis for the past two years. In this sense, I still consider myself a beginning poet. When attempting to pursue an art form as refined and historically informed as poetry, only after spending a number of years reading and writing intensively would I no longer consider myself a beginner, but a practitioner of the art. I've grounded my early development as a poet in concision, voice, and imagination, and hope to build upon these ideas with other poetic techniques, theories, and forms as I go forward. I am particularly interested in mastering the sonnet form, a concise and imaginative form that will allow me to further develop my skills. Hopefully, the works in this thesis reflect that effort.

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PART I  
PREFACE

Although I've read and written poetry for my own pleasure for about twenty years now, I've only seriously studied and written poetry on a consistent basis for the past two years. In this sense, I still consider myself a beginning poet. When attempting to pursue an art form as refined and historically informed as poetry, only after spending a number of years reading and writing intensively would I no longer consider myself a beginner, but a practitioner of the art. This may seem obvious to some, or harsh to others, but I feel that this mindset helps to put into context the ideas that I am about to discuss.

With some exceptions, most of the American poetry that inspired me in the past consisted of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, the Modernists, and the Beats. I've always admired Whitman's unabashed attitudes toward life and his sprawling lines, Dickinson's concision and curious punctuation, and the Beats' formal experimentation and ideas on American life that presented perspectives that were valuable and distinctly alternative to mainstream culture. But the poets whose works I've found most influential to my development to this point are Ezra Pound for his thoughts on concision in "A Retrospect," William Carlos Williams for his use of concision in small poems, T. S. Eliot for his defining of poetic voice in "The Three Voices of Poetry," and Wallace Stevens for his discussion of poetic imagination in "Imagination as Value."

In "A Retrospect," Pound's second of three principles for poets states that the poet should "use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation," a principle that he later refers to as the "economy of words" (Pound 3, 4). While his work, as well as the work of other Modernists such as Eliot and Yeats, exemplifies this principle (the work of any good poetry should exercise this principle), no poet's work of this era exemplifies this principle to me more than the work of William Carlos Williams. A number of Williams's poems could be used to

demonstrate this point, but two that have been particularly influential to me are “The Red Wheelbarrow” and “This is just to say.”

Pound elaborates his point in the “Language” section of the essay:

Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something.

Don’t use such an expression as ‘dim lands *of peace*’. It dulls the image.

It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the

Writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol.

Go in fear of abstractions (Pound 5).

In “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Williams uses simple, efficient language to present an evocative image for the reader, a technique that has helped me strengthen my own imagery and use of concision, such as in a piece like “Carcass”:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens (Williams 224)

The use of concise language and imagery creates a suggestive poem, a poem that compels the reader to consider ideas outside the images themselves. As Thomas Dillworth states,

“Conceptually, the wheelbarrow, rain, and chickens suggest the major components of agrarian life....The glaze of the rain water brightens the red of the wheelbarrow, and therefore intensifies its contrast with the whiteness of the chickens” (Dilworth 40). These images of the chickens and the wheelbarrow symbolize a common, everyday existence, yet the opening couplet compels the

reader to think beyond the explicit scene. This couplet is essential to the poem's suggestive nature; without it the importance of the images of the scene becomes lost. While the reader may contemplate many causes for the wheelbarrow's importance, these causes remain tethered to the simple, agrarian images that Williams puts forth in the poem.

As Pound directs, Williams goes in fear of abstractions, and his economy of words in the poem strengthens the imagery upon which he relies. The poem is more than mere description, and it does not bog down or become obfuscated in superfluous details or imagery. It lays out for the reader in one simple sentence a compelling scene of agrarian life. The use of couplets and line breaks creates space and pauses that force the reader to proceed slowly, further enhancing the economic effect. As the poem places so much pressure upon the wheelbarrow, it also places a significant amount of pressure on each word, on language itself, thus defining language as a simple, yet important, aspect of everyday life.

“This Is Just to Say” offers a more playful example of economy:

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold (Williams 372)

Again, Williams builds the poem around two images—the plums and the icebox—then enhances the images and the scene through sensory details and context—sweet and cold “and which/you were probably/saving/for breakfast.” The use of quatrains, however, creates a more fluid and



humorous tone for the reader as opposed to the disjointed tone produced by the couplets and line breaks in “The Red Wheelbarrow.” The quatrains don’t force the reader to pause like the couplets. They create more of a natural speaking effect, as if the reader is being spoken to, which in turn creates the humorous close in the final quatrain. Even though “This Is Just To Say” implements quatrains instead of couplets, concision and the importance of the image drive this poem just as significantly as they do in “The Red Wheelbarrow.”

While these types of short, imagistic, symbolic poems have been much maligned since they first began to appear in the early twentieth century, their importance in highlighting the effectiveness of economic language should not be lost on beginning poets and has not been lost on me. I consider these two poems to be among the best examples of economy of words, something for which all poems should strive. Close attention to concision can benefit any poet’s development of craft and style.

Most of what I know about voice, I’ve learned from reading fiction and fiction theory, particularly dialect and dialogue. For instance, Twain uses these techniques to create in Huck Finn a voice that is at once ignorant and insightful. However, these techniques have to do as much with creating character as they do with creating voice. Dialect and dialogue can be valuable when used effectively in poetry, but T. S. Eliot’s “The Three Voices of Poetry” establishes a more fundamental and practical model for approaching the use of voice in poetry. In his essay, Eliot discusses three main voices that poets use when writing poems:

The first voice is the voice of the poet to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is

saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character (Eliot 96).

I would like to add that “poet” may also refer to speaker since in many instances the poet and speaker can be different entities, and while the speaker may be different from the poet, the two may also hold some of the same sensibilities.

In his essay, Eliot discusses voice dilemmas he encountered while writing the verse plays *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, in particular, the difficulty switching between the voice of a chorus and the voice of a main character. In *The Rock*, the chorus speaks the words of the poet to the audience, and the same is true for *Murder in the Cathedral* with the exception that Eliot wrote the chorus for the charwomen of Canterbury, and therefore made an effort to “identify [himself] with these women.” As for the main character in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot had to consider conflicts that existed “within the mind of [the main] character” (speaker addressing self), and the conflict between “two [or more] characters” (imaginary character addressing another imaginary character) (Eliot 99). Clearly, the challenges presented in writing these verse plays compelled Eliot to think differently, and more consciously, about these three voices of poetry, a manner of thinking which I feel would benefit any poet, particularly a beginning poet such as myself. And while Eliot refers to verse plays in this essay, since I am discussing poetry, I would like to look at an example of Eliot’s poetry which also provides a compelling look at the use of the three voices.

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot at once compels the reader to distinguish between the three voices by using ambiguity to blur the lines between the three. For a poet, having to distinguish the three voices and examine their purposes in the piece provides a good

exercise at learning how to distinguish and develop the voice of a poem, which can only help the poet develop his or her own craft.

The poem itself opens with the line “Let us go then, you and I.” Since the poem has yet to provide a context that defines the “you” in this line, at this point, the poem may be addressing the audience or another character in the poem, an ambiguity that continues as the first stanza progresses and is sustained in the stanza’s final line: “Let us go and make our visit” (Eliot 3). Since the poem is a love song, one might assume that the speaker is addressing a lover here, but as Eliot points out, “...a good love poem, though it may be addressed to one person, is always meant to be overheard by other people” (Eliot 97). While Eliot may be observing that this is done on a more implied level in most love poems, in Prufrock, this appears to be done more deliberately.

For one, the speaker only addresses the “you” in 9 of the poem’s 131 lines. This lends itself to the effect that perhaps the lover is only a vehicle for the speaker to address the audience, or in some instances, for the speaker to consider his own thoughts. Additionally, the speaker never describes the lover in the poem. If the speaker had provided details such as “eyes as green as oceans,” or “hair as dark as night,” the lover would have some definition, thus eliminating the audience as a possibility as the “you”. On the other hand, the poem does provide situations where the “you” must be with the speaker in the poem:

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep...tired...or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me. (Eliot 5)

But even though the speaker places the “you” in the poem physically, this reference may still be open to interpretation. By placing the “you” beside him, the speaker may simply be associating himself with the reader in an effort to imply that the speaker and the reader are not so different.

Given the type of loathsome self-reflection considered by the speaker throughout the poet, this potential use of the “you” as reader may have a couple of effects: the reader might be put off by it, or the reader might relate to it and sympathize with the speaker. Presumably, the speaker intends for the reader to sympathize with his plight and develop a greater understanding of his condition in the world.

In the epigraph (as translated by Robert and Jean Hollander), Eliot plays with yet another aspect of voice, speaker to no one:

If I thought my answer were given  
to anyone who would ever return to the world,  
this flame would stand still without moving any further.  
But since never from this abyss  
has anyone ever returned alive, if what I hear is true,  
without fear of infamy I answer you (Dante).

While these lines indicate a meeting between Dante and Guido de Montefeltro, one character speaking to another character, the speaker, Guido, feels as though his words will never reach the world, as though he is speaking to no one. Of course, the poem will be read by an audience, but the idea of the speaker addressing no one resonates throughout Prufrock’s love song, as though no one ever hears him. This sense of anonymity adds poignancy to the speaker’s anonymous sense of himself in that it potentially refers to the reader as well, implying that anonymity and an absent voice are conditions of an individual experiencing existential crisis and alienation.

In “Prufrock,” Eliot manipulates and navigates the three voices of poetry in a profound and complex way that focuses the reader’s attention on voice when considered in the context of the poem’s larger meaning. The use of the speaker to no one in the epigraph informs Prufrock’s state of anonymity, while the use of a lover (imaginary character to another imaginary character) as a vehicle for the poet to address the audience opens the poem up to multiple interpretations that allow the audience to connect more personally to Prufrock and his reflections. Many

beginning poets, myself included, place ambiguous “yous” throughout their poetry, and these “yous” never reveal themselves to the reader. This concealment may or may not be meaningful and evocative. A sharp eye for distinguishing the three voices helps eliminate ineffective ambiguities. Additionally, paying close attention to the voices helps the poet create stronger speakers and characters in poems that may suffer from lack of definition or authority otherwise.

When considering voices and issues regarding an Iranian-American immigrant, a young man in the grips of the tragic loss of his friend, or a woman struggling with the loss of a loved one, I must necessarily consider ideas on different scales, and in order to render these dramas realistically and within reason, I must use “different imaginations”; I must be able to put myself in the place of different speakers dealing with different situations (Stevens 731). In “Candle and Mosque” I must consider the perspective of an Iranian-American immigrant dealing with the loss of his father, his own mortality, and the regrets of his leaving Iran; in “Elegy For My First Husband” I must consider the perspective of a divorcee reflecting on her relationship with a lost love.

One poem which symbolizes for me the value in the ability to shift imaginative perspectives is Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar.” In the poem’s first stanza, the speaker places a jar upon a hill in Tennessee, a seemingly mundane, if not unusual, task. However, the jar makes “the slovenly wilderness/Surround that hill.” These lines are spoken figuratively, but at this point, the reader has little clue as to how the jar causes the wilderness to surround the hill. The speaker elaborates as the poem continues:

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.

The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee. (Stevens 76)

In the speaker's observation of the placement of the jar, the both the wilderness and the jar are transformed. The jar's plain "gray and bare" appearance gains importance, within the context of the wilderness, while the wilderness loses much of its "slovenly" essence; the wilderness is "no longer wild." Of course, another casual observer may note that the jar is still just a jar and holds no more importance than it did before being placed on the hill, but the placement of the jar on the hill begs the reader to question the importance of context. It may compel the reader to consider the real in new ways, as it does for the speaker in the poem. How does the juxtaposition of two things as different as a jar and the wilderness cause the reader to us both in new ways? If we can perceive a jar and wilderness in new ways by simply placing the jar on the hill, do we now need this new context in order to look at other objects, people, or ideas from different angles? From these new considerations, new perspectives about the real may evolve, perspectives that may help generate a new appreciation for the real.

A similar ability to shift perspectives becomes increasingly valuable as the need to interact with different environments and different types of people increases, an ever-growing reality of the human condition in America today. As the need for interaction within a multicultural environment grows, the development of this ability can be of vital importance to today's American poet. The poet can render the real to the observer in ways that are thought provoking and poignant. It can help a suburban American family sympathize with the plight of third world families in dire poverty. It can help a public official consider new approaches at resolving an important environmental issue.

The ability to consider alternate perspectives can also help a poet develop his or her own style and craft. Although not a poem from the era of Modernism, Robert Hass's "Heroic Simile" embodies, for me, the vitality of the poetic imagination. The poem puts imagination on display and on trial in a way that compels the poet, as well as the reader, to reconsider how he or she thinks about imagination as it applies to poetic creativity.

In the poem's opening stanza, Hass compares Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* to Homer's *Iliad*, and then establishes a narrative that serves as the vehicle through which the poet explores creativity and the imagination:

When the swordsman fell in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*  
in the grey rain,  
in Cinemascope and the Takaguwa dynasty,  
he fell straight as a pine, he fell  
as Ajax fell in Homer  
in chanted dactyls and the tree was so huge  
the woodsman returned for two days  
to that lucky place before he was done with the sawing  
and on the third day he brought his uncle. (Hass 2)

The woodsman and his uncle continued chopping up the tree and stacking the logs into a pile until they tired, at which point the poet inserts himself into the poem:

They have stopped working  
because they are tired and because  
I have imagined no pack animal  
or primitive wagon. (Hass 2-3)

This insertion of the poet into the narrative draws the reader's attention to the poet's involvement in the creation of the poem, thus invoking the poetic imagination as a central element of the poem. The poet goes on to write, "They are waiting for me to do something/or for the overseer of the Great Lord/to come and arrest them" (Hass 3). These lines not only demonstrate the power a poet holds over his or her own work, but also places the poet at a distance from the work, implying that once the work is completed, it is out of the poet's hands. In order for this

move to be effective, the poet and the reader must shift perspectives; they must use “different imaginations.” The poet, even though he has ultimate control over his work, has to step back from this piece; as he does this the reader must make the same transition.

In the poem’s final stanza, the poet never completes the narrative:

I don’t know  
whether they’re Japanese or Mycenaean  
and there’s nothing I can do.  
The path from here to that village  
is not translated. A hero, dying,  
gives off stillness to the air. (Hass 3)

The admission of the poet’s loss of control over the piece in this stanza occurs within the terms of the poem’s narrative: “The path from here to that village/is not translated,” and further emphasizes the poet’s power in the creation of the narrative. In the following two lines, the poet steps outside the framework of the narrative: “A man and a woman walk from the movies/to the house in the silence of separate fidelities” (Hass 3). Once again, the reader and poet must shift perspectives in order to conceive this scene. Additionally, the poet juxtaposes a non-descript, or common, couple against mythic tales and a narrative that draws attention to imagination and the creative process, implying that imagination and creativity are not only important to artists and scholars, but also to ordinary people in everyday life. In fact, the man and the woman “walk...in the silence of separate fidelities.” They’re lost in their own thoughts, their own imaginations. The poet closes the poem with a thought that would most likely be agreeable to Stevens: “There are limits to imagination.” In the poem, the poet has trouble finishing the narrative, and as Stevens points out in his discussion of the limits of poetic imagination, the imagination operates on varying scales, the most momentous being that of international politics.

From a literary perspective, the Modernists provided many artists throughout the twentieth century and up to today with an aesthetic foundation upon which to build and develop



new movements and styles, a foundation of thought that has remained relevant, not only aesthetically, but also in many areas of Western culture. Many artists and critics over the last half century have been ready to throw the Modernists to the trash heap because of some of the political and social views expressed, and in some cases rightfully so. Yet, many of the Modernist ideas on technique and theory, such as concision and formal experimentation, prove to be so fundamental, so integral, to the aesthetic condition that they are impossible to ignore. In fact, many literary artists, it seems, implement many of these practices without ever knowing it.

As a poet attempting to develop my own style, I knew that in the beginning, I would want to focus on concision, voice, and imagination. I was already familiar with Pound's essay and ideas, and Williams's efficiency, and Stevens's ideas on imagination, but when I began searching for clues on how to develop poetic voices, I found many contemporary sources somewhat helpful, then I found Eliot's essay, which provided me with the fundamental ideas on voice for which I had been searching. I've had this experience a number of times when trying to develop new ideas with regards to my own work. Many times I end up finding the most useful and well-written thoughts in the works of these poets.

Additionally, I hope to ground myself in music, meter, and form. In this thesis, there are works that demonstrate that interest. There are sonnets, a pantoum, lyrics, couplets, and tercets. And while I feel it important to learn and understand poetic form, they will not carry any weight without a verbal economy, effective voices, or diverse imaginations. So I've grounded my early development as a poet in concision, voice, and imagination, and hope to build upon these ideas with other poetic techniques, theories, and forms as I go forward. I am particularly interested in mastering the sonnet form, a concise and imaginative form that will allow me to further develop my skills. Hopefully, the works in this thesis reflect that effort.

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PART II

POEMS

## Applications

*There are limits to imagination.*

-- Robert Hass

People had advice, of course.  
Don't send too many;  
send only to the right names,  
and then send only to the right people  
who work for the right names,  
and then send only to the right people  
who work for the right people  
who work for the right names, which should only  
be a few. No one ever really knows  
the favorite wishes of any name  
and its people, so I sent applications to every name  
in the city. People gawked as I did this.  
Then I sent to every name in the state.  
People gasped. Then every name in the country,  
in the world. People shrieked. Within two days I had  
No replies. "So what?" I thought. People cried.  
A life defined by what you can't  
do is a funny thing.  
I know a man in this poem  
Who walks in place on a square in a sidewalk  
like his feet are kneading sand.  
He remains, to this day, unaware  
of the gold that piles up behind him.

## Sacrifice

Sometimes I feel like I'm being swallowed.  
The other morning, my hands were too shaky  
to hold my coffee. It kept spilling across the slick  
and scarred surface of the diner table. The black pools  
drifting and wouldn't go away as I tried to wipe them up,  
like blood that had gone out of control.  
I had to step outside and crouch underneath a morbid  
November sky in a gravel yard, in the middle of nowhere,  
two steps from a sparsely travelled four-lane memorial highway,  
the occasional eighteen wheeler trucking gasoline,  
barreling through my hometown, its horn blazing.  
I was finally able to light a roll-your-own, my shoulders  
sore like a fresh shipwreck.

I fought back valor dreams  
earned in heavy breaths of anxiety  
racing over firefights, blindspotting  
tripwires, napalm that singed the branches  
and settled over glowing faces of brothers I loved  
struggling for indomitable peace in the night.

I thought about the Wise Men, and LBJ  
who raised his stakes around the White House,  
paid with his conscience, alone, in the end,  
with a compensatory illness on a dry ranch  
outside Johnson City.

*Will the new profiteers ever search themselves?*  
I wondered.

Half the time I don't care to know  
my own daughter and stepson.  
*Why'd I do it? Why'd I have to go so far,  
out there?*

## The Page

Grandfather stands on the pond bank  
black hair slick from Brylcreem.  
His uncle beats blood from a turtle  
for stealing his bait *Do it again, you son of a bitch*

Grandfather slits the gut of a yellow-green mudcat  
returns it to the murk, like Christ  
In my ear *He won't do that again*

You see, they knew hunger, one pair of shoes  
for the winter, calluses on their soles for the summer.

Today, the page—a green field swathed  
in azure. It mimics what I say back to me.

*Trying to get you to do anything  
is like talking to the wall. Trying  
to be a smartass I say What kind of wall?  
Like a trainer whose fighter  
stepped recklessly into a jab he says Smartass.*

In the far thicket the trees blow  
over centuries-old tombstones, souls  
egging the live oak leaves  
into one another, shake  
with power like the top of a twister.

As a young boy, Grandfather watches from a corner  
while his uncle, caught bootlegging by a government  
man, heaves a body into the furnace,  
never to be heard from again, never discussed.

Tomorrow, I'll remember he's there in the thicket,  
the page silent in the struggle  
between the eternal and the living.

## **Blue Gulls**

Tell Mom I won't be home at Christmas.  
I know I still have one hand and part  
Of a foot, but that doesn't make it  
Any easier to find work. Still waiting  
For all the benefits from the VA,  
Over 8 months now. I get enough so I can stay  
In my car on the beach, that way the gulls  
Can't get to me, pluck out my sanity completely,  
Tourist debris whirling 'round.

Occasionally, I get a free meal.  
I've got a canvas bag for my things,  
Children somewhere.

## **Elegy For My First Husband**

The voice of an old friend whimpered  
from miles away that you had gone  
alone—left Mary and your children  
on their own—a cell phone, a surrender  
to your father, and a gunshot  
in the front seat with you.

\*\*\*

Once I was your little seal pup.  
I tried to surprise you on your birthday  
With leather, a whip, and some chains.  
You threw me into a wall.  
I can't remember everything that happened.

\*\*\*

Our last day together, after you  
nearly beat life out of me, you were nowhere  
to be found while your father wanted me  
buried in order to look after you.  
He followed my smeared blood trail  
through the ranch house, thinking  
I was dead. He wanted me in the sand,  
with the rattlesnakes, and the oil,  
I'd be missing if I hadn't been alive.

\*\*\*

You rang your father in darkness  
Through the roof of your car  
All the way to the pinholes  
In the big black sky.



## **Candle And Mosque**

I was wrong to traipse away  
from the revolution into music,  
intoxicants, political freedom  
as the Shah took his place in exile.

In Iran, I was Mohammed;  
in the States, I am Mo.

With no prospects of children  
to care for you as intimately  
as you cared for our parents,  
you stayed while guns of wrath  
clanged about your head.

The songs I sing these days,  
in my middle age, weep  
and disturb the faces of people  
I know well. I slump at the news  
of Father's passing.

Unable to help you care for Father and Mother,  
for their memories I offer a lighted candle,  
a song of regret, the warmth of a mosque.

## **On Finding Jimmy Hoffa**

Celluloid—no—a digital airing  
over fiber optic spindles: Nicholson,  
De Vito by his side, rambles about  
JFK's ludicrous little brother.  
Reporters with firecracker flashbulbs  
play the sounds of yesterday's blues. In aerial  
footage, agents dig blindly for Hoffa's remains  
on a horse farm in Michigan.

What are we searching for in doomed fragments—  
truth, justice, carnage, cheap thrills, tomorrow  
morning's ashes? What's lost between the speeches,  
the news, the films, the corpse? Saving grace,  
we plow the earth, pilfering the bones of the dead.

## Opening Day

Like lamplight in the darkness, Spring  
Exhales a slight breath of warm air.  
From the cured fields, the clay and grass, we're born  
Like famished orphans leaning to steal.  
Lathed woods in the hands of our heroes gleam  
From the finish, the stain. At the plate,  
On the mound, in the field, the adorned pause  
For meditations on heart, leather, goats, and ivy.  
In our eyes, a pleading of the inane and the bold,  
For a predestined blast to bring relief  
From a long winter ripe with aging scorn.  
A stand on the diamond against the cold,  
The game's tepid steps not deft enough  
To offer comfort, to solve our longing.

## Dark Closet

I light another cigarette even though I don't want no more.  
Four empty packs on the window sill.  
I put an unread book back on the shelf.  
From the darkness the morning takes my name.  
Dewdrops flicker like crystal flames.

I thought of you until the night was clear.  
I thought of you all night.

The phone don't ring, and the kitchen's clean.  
The closet doors duct-taped shut.  
It's all I can do.

The fruit basket's full  
of rot and flies.  
All the colors have passed me by.

The coffee table glass murmurs history.  
It's all I can see.

I have no need for those clothes anymore.  
And nei ther do you.

## **Blank Verse**

Six bucks for two dutiful, consoling  
Beers—that's what I spent. Fifteen half-baked  
One-liners—that's what I wrote. The harder  
I tried, the more artfully words dodged  
The intentions of my beleaguered pen.  
Four monumental stanzas rose and fell  
Like the Roman Empire in an ant farm.  
The earth shook, and I remained seated. So  
I chicken-scratched some dribble into verse  
With a more than damn well certain feeling  
That in some way or other I drew blank.

## **Carcass**

Against a silver sky, buzzards  
Twined halos above oaks and cedars  
Into a double helix.  
The longer I traveled, the more I saw  
disappear: Blackland grasses whipping  
Past, barbed wires blended into roadside pastels,  
Cattle with their heads raised  
To caw, my father's body in a suit.

The clouds shone so sharp  
That day, it hurt.

## **Suffer**

As you summon last  
night's bits and pieces,  
recite each mile between  
Purgatory and Hell, between love  
and death, how much time  
between the beats of your heart,  
between each breath.

## Clovis Point

*Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary.*

-- Edward Abbey

In Clovis, New Mexico, a spearhead  
can slice through tall blades of grass for baskets,  
and into the hides of mammoths for food;  
only a few inches long, shaped like an aerial view  
of a galleon, evidence, say the theorists,  
that humans roamed North America  
before the Indians, before North America.

The Beringists claim these people  
caravanned from Siberia across a land bridge  
that spanned the Bering Strait  
over thirteen thousand years ago; Salutreans say  
the creators of the point rowed from southwestern Europe,  
slashing through ice in the Atlantic, before there was the Atlantic  
and world wars, over seventeen thousand years ago.

Inupiat hunters glide handcrafted driftwood and walrus-skin umiak  
through dark stretches of the Arctic and Baltic waters  
between Alaska and Greenland, hunting whale, seal, and walrus,  
camping under the boats on islands of ice when the weather gets rough;  
the natives cut fluid paths through unbearable temperatures  
and winds, the way that European tribes would have done  
in order to cross the dark, wide Atlantic  
during an ice age say the Salutreans.

A theorist holds a small rock in one hand,  
beats that rock with a larger rock, striking stone against stone,  
as if he were swinging a heavy hammer;  
blow after blow, he fractures flake after flake,  
spouts of dust at his hands, bands tall  
blades of grass in his grip, cuts the clumps of grass  
at the stalk bottoms, sweat matting his forearm,  
his footprints illuminating yesterday's trail.



## **Sierra Wildfire (August 1996)**

Outside Truckee, I-80 had been closed.  
We angled a southbound detour along 89  
that would bend around the northern edge  
of Tahoe, its clear, trenchant waters exposed.

From there, we could have been in a rush-hour  
traffic jam in downtown San Francisco from days  
before. As I dozed, the delusion of the fire's size and location  
conflagrated through the Redwoods of my dreams:

broad, angelic trunks of sap spitting and cracking  
under enormous pressure from Heaven's demons  
ashing needles; hellfighters doused blaze after blaze  
on one of those days when fighting does little good.

As we crossed the state border, east of Devastation  
Forest, we inched toward darkness under casino lights,  
wading through the bellowing traffic drawn  
by slot machine jingles, ticking wheels of fate,

dotted, dancing bones. Out of touristy complacencies, farther  
from devastation's place in distance, yet nearer in time,  
axles grinding, we descended the mountain's curving grade  
toward Reno, a dusty, neon garden, a weigh station on the edge of sunset.

## Time

Squat, diapered legs and a curious torso,  
eyes heightened—his and his sister's,

their heads pressed together  
through a crack in the privacy  
fence, watching cars pass.

Another world out there.

When hair comes back,  
again and again, from places

burned last month to nothing  
but a spot shadow on an MRI,  
burned slow as the sun

yellows, in this Polaroid;  
the grass at his pigeoned feet.

When he examines  
for the first time,  
the family albums,

asks what he was like as a baby,  
asks about the doctors, the medicine,  
laughs at his denim shorts and snakeskin boots;

I'll tell him what it was like to hold him  
down while he screamed from injections;

I'll let him know  
what it's like  
to measure love in tears.

## Waiting

my sole tattoo,  
black in flesh,  
1-8-6-3-2-7

Our silver—gone,  
china—gone.

Now I live in one of the boroughs,  
the first that would have me.  
I burrowed, I burrow, I'm burrowing.

They threw stones  
and bullets and gas,  
and trains, endless trains,

the dead  
always rising  
from steam.

## Skate Punks

Why this child after eleven PM  
in the lot behind my bedroom window,  
scraping the pavement in sub-freezing  
temperatures? Thin, lanky, shaggy-  
headed, curb-hopping, mini-wheeled  
daredevil throwing himself against the odds,  
licking his wounds under piss-poor lighting  
in the shadow of a thoughtless facade.  
I search and find it's the fault  
of thirty years of progress, an evolutionary step  
in Dogtown, Santa Monica, where these stringy-headed,  
stringbean assholes commandeered vacant pools,  
spun their wheels up and down whitewalled  
curves with cops on their heels, fence over fence,  
backyard to backyard, broken home to broken home,  
like Woody Guthrie and Jack Kerouac peeling the rails  
for lost stories and songs, Charlie Parker's frantic  
pursuit of bop, Charlie Christian's backyard  
woodbox guitar, Billie Holiday's tear-stained blues,  
Emily Dickinson's promiscuous dashes. The pool circuit  
dried up when competitions broke out,  
publications went national, endorsement deals  
flew in. Board ramps rose in stature  
along with the stakes, the tricks, and the elevations.  
Now there's big money in that shit—video games,  
X-games, weekend spotlights, prime time coverage,  
slides and grinds, aeriels and kickflips, lip tricks,  
Ho-Ho plants, 720s, Indy 720s, frontside bluntsides,  
Andrechts, Elguarials, sex changes,  
goofys, grabs, and Rock and Roll.  
From sunny '70s California to an ice cold night  
in a new Texas millenium, those poor bastards  
are the reason this poor bastard, underneath the shade  
of a streetlight, squeaks his shoes and cracks his board,  
stomps his feet trying to climb a curb.

## **Black Cows**

Black, bright eyes agape like a thin,  
Belligerent moon on a deep night,  
Waiting for something to show, someone  
That will never appear. A dark mass  
Sunk in mud on the insides of four, posted corners—  
A dusty, red corral in the middle of nowhere.

The best of us often found in the middle of nowhere.  
Pluck a hair from a calf, slit it so thin  
That when one part blows from your hand, it penetrates the night,  
Penetrates it so precisely that when someone  
Finds the hole, it appears like a piece of incense dust from a mass,  
Like an unfelt touch from an angel in the corner.

Never fear work from a corner,  
Where the best of us often find nowhere.  
Inhale breaths strategic and thin  
Until the sun uncovers the day from a restless night,  
A day that warms, and presses you into someone,  
Someone confirmed from a convoluted mass.

No meaning may evolve from a mass,  
The sun magnetizes the heart's blood, pulls you from the corner,  
Into something, someone, where the best of us often find nowhere.  
Look into the black eyes of the cows, a thin,  
Foggy sheen over the empty holes like a veil over night:  
Do they stare back thinking they are someone?

I'm thinking of a black cow dream that someone  
Left me to leave you, like a layman reads the gospel to a mass  
Punctuated by a gruff cough from an imagined corner,  
A cough that seemed to come from nowhere  
Yet echoed off the splintered, cedar walls, resonant and thin.  
I turn back the sheets at night.

I still hear the cough. At night  
It seems to come from no one instead of the someone  
I never heard that morning in the mass.  
Unnerved in bed, I take the covers to the corner  
And imagine drifting off to nowhere,  
To the place where I first saw the cows  
    and discussed them with you. Your thin  
Ears bent toward me all the way through the night.

Take a thin line and erase it more transparent than the night of the black cows.  
Work with someone, grow new thoughts of a mass of hearts  
From a corner in nowhere until the day opens again.

## **Pallbearer's Pantoum**

What is this coffin we carry?  
What buries our future with our past?  
In graveyard mud we stumble, tarry,  
Moist in April's sun at mid-afternoon.

What buries our future with our past?  
The corpse of a fellow traveler,  
Moist in April's sun at mid-afternoon,  
Not knowing what he left behind.

The corpse of a fellow traveler,  
As we place him on high before his tomb,  
Not knowing what he'd left behind.  
I imagine a premature last breath.

As we place him on high before his tomb,  
In loose-fit suits on loan from our fathers,  
I imagine a premature last breath.  
Our homes dried by the tears of our mothers.

In loose-fit suits on loan from our fathers,  
We sweat with the bees in the sun.  
Our homes dried by the tears of our mothers,  
Our bones ache with what can't be undone.

Bees storm around the sun.  
What is this coffin we carry?  
Our bones ache with the undone.  
In graveyard mud we stumble, tarry.

## Hero Worship

First, it was all about baseball,  
flapping metal numbers onto  
a green scoreboard, hovering  
above centerfield, removed  
from the action where parents  
cheered as their children  
ran down flies, stole bases, and pounded  
long drives toward me.

Then, I dug my own spikes  
into the sandy clay and was an all-star,  
like Ryne Sandberg and Glen Hubbard  
on the superstitions, gobbling  
up ground balls, a glove—  
a grotesque mitten—on my left hand,  
like a mutated aardvark snout  
plucking ants out of the grass,

Then it was all about guitar,  
Jimi Hendrix on my wall,  
informing my attempts  
at feedback, Elvis Presley  
looming over my right shoulder,  
pressing the tips of my fingers  
for two or three hours  
at a time onto thin, wiry strands  
of nickel and bronze,  
until they blistered and bled.

Once, I met Roy McMillan,  
after whom the ballfields  
in my hometown were named; I saw  
plaques and photos on his walls  
from his time as a player in the Major Leagues:  
five fielding awards—three gold gloves,  
a silver dining set from the Mets  
for his retirement. Before the tour  
He shook my hand.



Later, I learned how Charlie Christian is buried  
in my hometown, how he plucked  
his way into Benny Goodman's band,  
despite Goodman's sabotage attempts.  
One of a handful who could keep pace  
with Parker. I learned how he contracted  
consumption and died in New York far away  
from our hometown where today  
Tombstones sing in the place  
Of Roy McMillan fields.

## Death Penalty

In the indifference  
of the window box  
with its dusty glass,  
on such a warm day,  
desiring to be raised,  
among the town's capital  
presence in repose in late  
April while live oak  
and green holly leaves  
press the fringes  
of the wire-mesh  
screen and a gradual  
Texas spring lays claim  
to skulking bodies,  
whose half-naked feet  
slap the pavement  
in front of specialty shops,  
that traipse place to place,  
fretting over items  
to purchase away  
from the shop vendors' hands,  
a bee's buzz unnerves the ear  
of a listener, that listener,  
who is me preparing  
a venture onto buses  
and sidewalks, a gathering  
of strangers in a sublime  
springtime, has to stop,  
inquire about the buzz  
of the bee that is in fact  
not a bee; it's a wasp  
—a hornet—a yellow jacket,  
to be quite correct,  
that has itself trapped,

bounding in the dank  
cradle of the sill  
between the glass  
and the screen. I notice  
the dry earth in the palm's  
pot. I'll dab it later,  
I say, and take one more  
long look at the hornet whose  
yellow and caramel rings  
light fleetingly here and there,  
from still to unstill; a blink  
of the eye misses  
essential moments  
of this stinging strife,  
Critical moments  
in the lives of beings  
that are helpless  
at some times  
and at other ticks  
of the sun's silent  
rapture beat strong  
with their hearts ruthless songs  
of death. To raise the glass  
would subject the wasp—  
hornet—to inflamed  
anguish that neither of us  
desires to endure.  
The one of us then  
hopes, prays even, that  
the other—yellow jacket,  
the caramel fly—  
lets itself loose  
in the same way it  
happened to get stuck  
in a world of glass  
and mesh that beats heat  
into its place at a frenzying pace  
that vacillates from  
extreme to extreme.

At sunset, I pour  
myself a glass  
of ice cold tea, having  
returned from my trip  
that included two long  
waits because for the first  
bus I meant to catch, I arrived  
late, and the second, downtown,  
broke down just across  
the Congress Street bridge.  
In the cool twilight, I hear  
no bee's buzz;  
the yellow jacket—  
caramel fly—drowned  
in sunlight, in a scorching heat  
and iridescent blasts,  
its shell left to bear  
witness to the closings  
and openings of the case  
until the waning  
grey days of December.

## Somewhere Else

There was a mango-colored house for sale,  
A stucco bungalow, but there was no way  
We could afford it at the time: I was about  
To be unemployed, and she worked for a man  
Whose employees paid themselves on their own  
Out of his checkbook because he was always  
Somewhere besides his place drinking Dewar's—  
About a gallon a day; unlike the others, she wouldn't pay  
Herself, except out of her tips, until after I was unemployed.  
I have, nor ever have had, any idea about the price  
Of the house even though we drove by it almost daily  
On the way from my place to hers and from hers to mine, dipping  
Down a hill, over a speed bump, and back up again  
Between the interstate and Congress Avenue where Monroe Street  
Would turn into West Annie four blocks from the bar.  
Eventually, the man returned, after an out-of-town  
Stay, with mentions of blood coughing and resuscitation,  
And she quit and took another job because she realized  
She couldn't stand the guy. I was still unemployed.  
In the meantime, she moved in with me, and the house remained  
On the market, and the black speed bump and mango stucco  
Bungalow circled my thoughts. Eventually, the house sold,  
And we began to visit friends in that neighborhood.  
Enormous green trees grew there with bark as thick  
As molasses, perennial leaves as tough as nails.  
"I've met my match," she said. I'd heard this before,  
Years ago, from someone who was special to me then.  
It was a an uncomfortable surprise, and then contentment  
arrived in the fall, on a light Saturday morning  
that had nowhere better to go and nothing better to be.

## Desert

your words hang

like bees on a stone rose

like stars in a canyon basin

we cross into new mexico

I slide into you

your inflections

the salt of your breath

we drive we rise

to an unforeseen place

that awakens us

where we hear farther than god intended