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Ellie Bixler

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, vnd868@mocs.utc.edu

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Young Adult: A Poetic Exploration of Modern American Life

Ellie Tripp Bixler

Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga
Humanities Department

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Richard Jackson
Professor of English
Thesis Director

Dennis Plaisted
Associate Professor
Department Examiner

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Drone Strike

The earth screams.
A calf has escaped the pasture.
She presses her soft nose
to the tufts of dandelion
that grow by the road and
bleats for her mother.

The night, cloudless once
again, the air stretched thin
as rotted elastic. In the orchard,
the almond trees shudder
as the brush-fire grows and
their leaves begin to smolder.

The calf feels the flame
and knows that the warmth
is her mother's. She watches,
moon-eyed, as the stars whistle
towards the earth and the barn
where yesterday she was born
is shredded by light, by screams.

Edisto Beach in January

The sea-salt wind stung my eyes
as I crouched over the small hole in
the sand and stared as tiny bubbles of air
floated up and into the surf.

You kneeled next to me and asked what
I was looking for, and I told you I watched
a sea louse crawl into that hole a few minutes earlier,
and I wanted to make sure he came back out.

You stood and tucked your hand into mine,
and said that things aren't always promised
to happen, and besides, the sun was setting,
the ocean wind was cold, and on our walk home

I noticed how proud the palm trees stood, how
freely the sea grass danced, how carelessly they
let the golden light drip down their fronds. You
stooped, ran your fingers through the sand,

and found a shark's tooth. You held it to the light
and explained that it was there because there's a port
nearby, and they were dredging the sand to
deepen the water for ships, and sometimes

the best things -- like sharks' teeth and sea lice--
are good at waiting for the right time to be found.

Yesterday's Newspaper

Do not despair, old friend.

Read, Bomb Dropped in Da Nang.
Read, Man-Seeking-Conversation in Brooklyn.

Feel the rail worn gold
beneath your palm.
Breathe deep the smell of figs,
of tobacco, still in your coat.

Yesterday she sat here
nursing a hand-rolled cigarette,
wrapped in smoke and ostrich feathers,
newsprint draped across her lap.

This crossword's too easy, she said.
Let's see Coltrane next week, she said.

Yesterday you laid
catty-cornered on your couch,
her hair white and stuck to your lips.
It was then, tucked in your arms
that, to you, she felt small,
fragile, for the first time.

A spitting image of her mother, you say.
Don't forget to water the flowers, she said.

Today you are here,
with the figs and tobacco
with the lily-of-the-valley in bloom
with her hair still stuck to your lip,
with her stockings left wilted on the floor.

It comes easy now
to hate the perennial,
to despise the rising moon.
The paper is torn in your hands.
The headlines look small on the page.

Elegy for My Brother

It was my brother who showed me how
when you hold the tips of two
burning matches together
the flame triples in size,
and we sat together on the warm playground
asphalt and watched the matches burn
down to our fingertips. I would shriek
and drop the flame just before
I could feel its heat, and crush
the tiny embers into the blacktop.
But my brother would sit quietly, hunched
small over his matchstick, watching
the flame move closer to his skin until
the wood had all burned away, and only
the fire remained, and for a moment he held it
there, smoldering between his fingertips.

Reincarnation

A woodpecker
clings to my ribcage
and drills holes
in my sternum,
tapping straight down

into my spinal cord.
I can almost feel
the wisp of autumn
wind in my lungs,

the molten sunlight
dripping through me,
pooling in my mouth
in the palms of my hands
and around my feet.

The bird taps again
flutters her dark wings
and for a moment
I feel her heart beat.

A Survival Guide

Sometimes,
you just have to let 'em be wrong,
my mother always said to me.

The butter knives don't always
have to go in the dishwasher blade down.
It's not always worth the fight.

You make excuses as an act of love.

We love them for the times that the blades face down.
For the times that the dishwasher is loaded and washed
and put away without you even knowing
which way they were facing in the first place.

It's easy to love people

when the knives are dulled
by nights around the kitchen table,
even when they are pointed straight up,
even when you nick yourself reaching for a mug.

Cable Television

A Time Magazine pop-up ad told me yesterday
that they've compiled a list of the top YA novels
of all time, and I wondered what the hell a YA
was, and how someone could possibly claim
to be both Young and an Adult, like some kind of
Cronenberg, clawing their way out of the
pimplly alphabet soup of adolescence and
into a three-piece suit and polished leather loafers.
And I read in National Geographic that there's
a woman in India who, once a year, drinks
goat's blood and channels the goddess Kali,
and when the drums are beating loud in her
ears she is dances wildly on the threshold,
both flesh and light, the movement and the sound,
a gentle mother and the endless, raging river.
And last night on NBC, I saw the face of someone
who was shot twice in the back and fell into the
purgatory between a boy and a man, who lived Young
and died an Adult, and as his name scrolled across
the news crawler and the words turned to the screams
of his mother, we sat back and watched him writhe
and crawl between a bloodstain and a beating heart.

A Political Climate

There's apparently a point in walking-
somewhere halfway between that left and right,
left and right step
when we're in freefall-

burning through the atmosphere
at a million miles per hour;
colliding with the pavement
leaving craters, big as swimming pools

for our kids to splash and play
and drown in, when we aren't looking.

How To Grieve

What is a void? Why
does it sound sometimes
like a telephone landline?
How can electric wires
carry your voice from
out there? Is there enough
light to see in outer space?
How old is a photon?
Where does the lamp light
go at night when you close
your eyes? Can a photon die?
Do stars die of old age?
How old is the oldest living organism?
How can something be so old yet so small?
Why do some things get to live
longer than others? How can you tell
the difference between something small
and something insignificant?

What I Know About Blackjack

An old man leans against the barn door.
Under the sycamore tree with wet feet,
Phaedrus explains with perfect enunciation
that it is much better to be friends than lovers.
He peels off his socks. The sycamore seeds rupture
and the world is blanketed in blinding white.
Sometimes there is a small wrinkle
in the space-time continuum
and a small boy from a farming town
outgrows his boots and his shirt and sets out
to find the edges of the earth, where the force
of its spin feels like a neon tilt-a-whirl
where a slip or a stumble sends him flying,
hurtling through the milky vacuum of the night sky-
past Andromeda and the baby bears-
landing on a barstool in Casino Niagara
counting rosary in one hand and spades in the other
wondering if better not to be friends at all.
He sips plum liquor and remembers his home.
His garden grows over with dandelion weed.
A barn door leans against an old man.

It Never Happens This Way

You are born slowly,
your soul crumpled, discarded.
Take your time here,
be sure to mend each seam

Lay your body down. Hold it
close. Lose yourself in it.
Stretch until you are the
start of every thought

of quiet despair, of love
fear, anticipation, delight
of hope, devastation

Know only the truth
is unwittingly unequal
when wholly understood.

TV Dinner

We don't sit at the table anymore,
where there's four sides
six chairs
and five mouths to feed
and the distance around
is equal now
to all-our-arms plus two.
And everyone knows
that empty chair
can't pass the salt
or make the baby laugh
and that grace doesn't count
unless you all hold hands.

The Confederacy

A heatwave hit south Georgia
yesterday, and an old man sat with
lemonade sweat dripping down
his glass and his purple-pink
hands and onto the porch-- soft White
Pine that great-granddaddy cut
from the banks of the Savannah--

banks that caressed the gentle
snaking river with its steady pulse
and steaming breath that danced
in the violent heat, where- when the
old man looked- he could see himself
as a boy, swimming pale and naked and deaf
to the screams echoing below the surface.

Repentance Prayer

I'd prefer to die in spring, when the grass is wet
and the cherry-blossoms are in full bloom.
I'll sit my body down beneath their sickly-pink branches
and think about pepto-bismol until my heart gives out--
I'd rather not be moved from my spot under that tree
until my skin crawls off and my eyes shrivel up
and it sheds its tiny pink petals and covers me with them.
I want to look like a kind of macabre Care Bear,
my chest split open and my heart falling into my belly.
I hope that-- before they find me, before they bleach my bones
and steal my teeth and lock me in a zip-loc bag for my mother--
the earth will take what I owe, that mold will sprout from my palms
and the soles of my feet. I want to ripen and swell
and my body to fill with blow flies and maggots.
I want them to enjoy their meal, to eat their fill
in springtime, in the shade of the cherry tree,
their table set with the finest ivory,
flower petals lain gently around them.

Road-Trip Buddha

I was hitchhiking last summer when a man with only half a jaw rolled his old Winnebago into the shoulder and gestured for me to get in. Before I could ask (I wasn't going to ask) he told me that he left the other half on some mountain somewhere in Korea, along with his heart and some bits of brain-matter, probably. Now, he said, he's on his way to Atlantic City to bury the friend who watched him lose it (His mind? His jaw?). As the camper slowed to a stop and I climbed down to the road, I asked him if he ever thought to go back and find it; to Korea, for his jaw. He looked down at me with his half-a-smile and said sometimes in life you just have to learn that there are some things better off left behind. Then, he turned back to face the road.

Elephant Ears

One night
before I fell asleep,
the Big Friendly Giant told me
that his ears were so big
he could hear a flower scream
as it was plucked,

and when I woke up
I had elephant ears,
and my head hurt
from all the noise.

In fourth grade science class
we learned that plants breathe,
and that trees feel pain
and that the smell
of freshly cut grass
is the smell of fear,

and at recess
the stench wrinkled my nose,
and as I played,
I could feel the earth recoil
beneath my feet.

The Golden Days

It's September. It's afternoon. I drive too close
behind you down the wooded road that shrank
from interstate to highway to unpaved onelane.
I remember you when we were nine and sitting

squatted in the caverns of kudzu coating the hill
by my house, how your skin, specked with light,
looked a fawn's- new and precious - to me. I see
the memory spotted on you now, your left hand

draped carelessly out the window, warm folds of
gold-dusted sun running through your fingers and
onto our cheeks. I hoard it: you, the day, the road,
the small sway of the trees, September, afternoon.

Snapshots of America

Miami
a *ventanita*
sweet and
foamy
conversation

wriggling and squeezing
rushed espresso
one café con leche, one
guava pastry and two
empanadas

Atlanta
frantic face
mask on
the Safeway
billboard

Yellow school
bus bungalows, brown
Sacks of breakfast, supermarket
sweep, babies under the
rug drying on the porch

Cleveland
waitressing
a burger-
joint, heroin,
crack cocaine

the house gleams with
recovery meetings, online
a single voice in an ocean, near
breaking waves to one
another

New York
small pinpricks
of stars,
white ICU
beds, tents

summer picnics on
lush grass struck by shrapnel
launched in Manhattan, the sky
a stubborn glow of joy
cometh in the morning

Morning Glory

The morning glory in my garden
bloomed only once
before it died,
too early for me to see.

When I woke, hours later,
the street was busy with cars
and the flower was gone,
wilted and small in the dirt.

But I know it was there
briefly, moonfaced,
fragile in the cool air of dawn,
beautiful and alone.

It needed to be seen
only by the hummingbird,
to be alive
only to watch the sunrise.

Translation

Robert Frost once said that
poetry is what gets lost in translation,
and as the truck rumbled south
on the red dirt of a forgotten state highway
somewhere deep in West Texas,
you must have wondered if it was true.
And if it *was* true, I'm sure you asked,

then what would happen to the
words you had chosen so carefully
and left in the bed of the truck,
bound tightly in a small journal
and tucked in with your socks,
when you reached the Rio Grande.
It must have hurt, I'm sure,

when you arrived in your wife's town
and realized the pages were blank,
your pen couldn't write, and your
words had been washed downstream,
stuck in the Giant Reeds of an eddy
somewhere east of El Paso.
Was it a surprise to you then,

when, as you spoke to your mother-in-law
for the first time, your words came out in verse?
I sometimes wonder what it was like, for you,
when you opened your English-to-Spanish
dictionary, and your words were there
waiting for you, in the space between
Hola and Casa and Te Amo.

El Mojado (The Wetback)

The sun is the barrel of a shotgun, white-hot,
puffing thin ribbons of smoke through the dead summer air.

Fifty miles northwest of here are mesas-
purple-pink and barely visible on the horizon,
stacked high with tomatillos, tamales,
soft, fetid mangos.

Beside me, a jack-rabbit cocks his ear.
He hears his mother call him home and vanishes into the heat.

I move to follow him, but the brush is on fire
and my feet are saguaro roots, and the sun
is the barrel of a shotgun, and the vulture is a speck
of gunpowder falling to the dirt.

In the distance, the mule deer watch the sky-
the old tortoise puts his ear to the ground. A coyote's scream
echoes across the valley.

Here, a gecko finds shade in my rib cage.

Craft Essay

Adrienne Rich, in her 1993 essay “Someone Is Writing a Poem,” writes “In a political culture of managed spectacles and passive spectators, poetry appears as a rift, a peculiar lapse, in the prevailing mode.” In this collection, I make my own attempt to part with the prevailing mode. I use my poetry as a means of engaging and contending with the American socio-political dialogue that often feels both deeply pervasive and largely inaccessible. Grounded in the thematic conventions of political and ecological poetry, and influenced by the work of poetic greats the likes of Tony Hoagland, Wendell Berry, William Stafford, and W.S Merwin, I developed a set of artistic principles to guide my writing and encourage cohesion within the collection. From this, I developed a creative voice that best reflects my lived experience and the ideals and convictions at the core of my work.

Politics

In Edward Hirsch’s *The Essential Poet’s Glossary*, political poetry is defined as “poetry of social concern and conscience, politically engaged poetry.” What, then, does it mean to be politically engaged? To live in the United States in the 21st Century is to live in a world of political omnipresence. Politics no longer exist simply as a means of government action but as a cultural identity, a pastime, a means of social organization. One now identifies himself first as a man, and second as a Republican. Despite this expansive reach of American political culture into the furthest recesses of our personal lives, the range of our political spectrum is quite narrow; the distance between the established left and right is relatively small. In this way, the American political understanding is both too restrictive and too nebulous, making it difficult to identify whether subject matter, poetic or otherwise, can be accurately characterized as “political”.

Eileen Myles, in her essay “Political Economy,” cuts to the heart of this dilemma. To understand political poetry, she writes, we must “understand the intimate balance going on between information, sentiment, and aesthetics that determines... whether [a poem] even seems political to us. She proposes that the notion of a political poem one of individual interpretation, defined as “a complex projection and reception of self and selves onto the moving surface of the poem in its time.” If this is true, then there is exists an inherent futility in establishing a working definition of what political poetry *is*. However, in order to write an honest collection of self-described “political poems”, I needed to establish my own set of guiding ideals. I had to determine not only what makes a poem political, but how to apply this definition to my own work. In doing so, I found it much easier to begin by describing what political poetry is *not*.

First, political poetry is not didactic. Didactic poetry exists, yes, and the genres can overlap to a certain degree, but political poetry does not need to inform, teach, or persuade to be political. Often, the preachy quality of didactic poetry has an adverse effect on the impact of the political message. Instead, they can be a question, a testimony, or a memory. In Gerald Stern’s “The Dancing”, he describes the living room celebration of his family after the end of World War II, writing “the three of us whirling and singing, the three of us/ screaming and falling, as if we were dying,/ as if we could never stop--in 1945--/ in Pittsburgh, beautiful filthy Pittsburgh, home/ of the evil Mellons, 5,000 miles away/ from the other dancing--in Poland and Germany.”

In the piece, Stern invites the reader to engage in an act of empathy. They are drawn into the living room of the narrator and his family, imbibed with their joy and their pain, and then left alone to come to their own understanding. Never once does Stern instruct the reader to be joyful for the end of the war, nor does he lecture them on the atrocities of Nazi occupation, and yet, that

is what the reader is left with. It is this subtle communication, this quiet invitation for the reader to join the poet in their assertions, that is so valuable and so persuasive.

Second, political poetry is not, necessarily, protest poetry. This subgenre interweaves with the political even more closely than didactic poetry: all protest poetry is political, but not all political poetry is in protest. In his Edward Hirsch's *Poet's Glossary*, he defines protest poetry as "poetry of dissent and social criticism." As opposed to the more neutral social engagement of political poetry, a protest poem "protests the status quo and tries to undermine the established values and ideals." Stating that protest poetry is not political poetry is in no way an attempt to undermine the importance of protest poetry or its place in poetic history. In fact, at a time when the status quo is so ineffective and dangerous for many members of our society, protest poetry can be alluring.

Poet and activist Christopher Soto writes, in his essay lauding protest poetry, "I'm interested in poetry that is rhetorically centered, dangerous and provocative, untrusting, angry, and yelling back at state violence or oppression otherwise seen." Protest poems spur social change, and in the past have caused their authors to face legitimate prosecution. As recently as 2016, Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh was sentenced to death—which was later reduced to 8 years prison—by the Saudi government for his work. In the United States, protest poetry has interlaced with our history from the beginning. From the Philip Freneau anti-British poems of the American revolution, to Gwendolyn Brooks advocating civil rights, to Audre Lorde in the women's liberation movement of the seventies, poets have used their voice to push back on forces of power. Perhaps it is because of this profound history that I feel the need to draw a line between protest and political poetry. Political poetry is not necessarily an act of resistance, but an invitation to the reader to approach an idea from a new and different point of view.

Third, a poem does not need to be about governmental politics to be political. In his essay “The Politics of Poetry” American poet David Orr asks “Is a political poem simply a poem with “political” words in it, like “Congress” or “Dachau” or “Egalitarianism”? Or is it a poem that discusses the way people relate (or might relate) to one another?” I would argue that the heart of politics is in the relationships they establish between human beings. It is how we treat one another, as individuals and as a collective. Confining political poetry to the literal realm of legislation, elections, and pantsuits means ignoring the potential range of the genre in favor of a western, Americentric understanding of what politics are.

Ghanaian poet Kwame Dawes, in his own essay on politics in poetry, writes that “political poetry in America is a victim of the very circumscribed political climate that exists in this society,” and I agree. It is less important to reference specific political events or ideologies than it is to consider what the poem hopes to accomplish. It would be easy to write a poem chronicling the day of a congressman. However, if that poem reaches no conclusion and asks nothing of its reader, then it can hardly be considered political, or a poem.

What, then, must a political poem do or contain in order to be defined as such? From the slurry of literature that exists on this topic, a dominating principle emerges: above all else, political poetry must reject the sentiment of apathy and call upon the reader to do the same. Dawes writes on the subject, “I suspect that one could posit that poets who shatter how we engage the world through the rupture of language, for instance, are engaged in a political act.” This, to me, serves as the guiding philosophy when approaching my own poetry. The goal in my writing is to disrupt the reader’s point of view, if only for the time that they are reading the poem. I try to invite them, briefly, to leave their world and join me in mine.

Ecology

Of the poems most known and beloved by American society, a significant number deal in the natural world. From Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" to Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese," the poems that most resonate with the greater populace center firmly around the idea of the wild. Whether a remnant from the era of Westward Expansion or our most primitive origins, the allure of the great outdoors captures the American imagination in a way that most things cannot. Something about the vast unknown – the pristine wilderness – begs to be explored, to be imbued with meaning. All at once, the natural world represents purity, chaos, balance, transformation, barrenness, bounty. It is the place where life ends and life begins, where identity and ego are called into question. All this to say, it yields near-unlimited poetic inspiration.

I believe I am drawn to writing ecological poetry because of my own experience using nature as a place of healing and reflection. When I become overwhelmed by the stressors of everyday life, I often find myself retreating into the woods to spend the day floating a river or enjoying the sun on a warm rock. There, out of view from the rest of the world, I am able to introspect, to consider my lived experience from a perspective I otherwise could not achieve. Writing ecological poetry is, in a way, a proxy for this experience. In many of the poems in my collection, I use nature as a means to approach conceptually difficult social and political ideas. This typically manifests in one of two ways: first, by using nature and ecology to supplement commentary on social and cultural issues, and second, by directly addressing the destruction of nature as a political issue itself.

Political poetry and ecological poetry have long been intertwined in American history. There are countless instances, from the Civil War to Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter and the fight for equality. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, arguably the most influential of American

anthologies, is as idyllic in its nature imagery as it is undeniably political in its sensuality. In his poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” Whitman elegizes the late Abraham Lincoln, writing “O powerful western fallen star!/ O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!/ O great star disappear’d—O the black murk that hides the star!” Here, he uses natural imagery— the sky, the star— likening the death of Lincoln to the falling of a star into darkness. “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou continues to be one of the best-known poems of the Civil Rights era. In it, Angelou writes “The caged bird sings/ with a fearful trill/ of things unknown/ but longed for still/ and his tune is heard/ on the distant hill/ for the caged bird/ sings of freedom,” using the story of the free and caged birds as an allegory for the segregated realities of the black and white experience in America.

As in these two instances, poets use ecological imagery in political poetry because of the divisive, onerous nature of political discourse. Nature triggers empathy and an emotional response that humans may not feel for one another. By using natural imagery to metaphorize social issues, poets tap into the reader’s emotional response and possibly alter their perception. “Caged Bird” particularly exemplifies this. The anti-racist, political undertones of the poem are clear. However, in choosing to write about birds in lieu of directly addressing racial inequality, Angelou averts the reader’s preconceived political ideologies and presents her ideas in a way that may be more palatable for someone in opposition. She invites the reader first to feel empathy for the birds, thereby encouraging empathy for their fellow man. The shared experience and appreciation of nature acts as a unifying force. In several poems in my collection, such as “El Mojado” and “The Confederacy,” I use natural imagery similarly.

Now, the increasing human impact on our planet’s wild spaces has bound political and ecological poetry even more tightly together. No longer simply a metaphor, the natural world has

become one of the central political issues of our time. At a time of climate crisis, eulogizing the beauty of wilderness demands a reckoning of our role in its destruction. Poetry has always served to make the intangible, tangible. It is the poet's job to translate abstractions, concepts, emotions, into language that can be accessed and understood. Never has there been a better application of this skill than with climate change and environmental protection.

Poet and environmentalist Wendell Berry has understood this need for decades. In an essay, Berry writes "To cherish what remains of [the Earth] and to foster its renewal is our only hope." The recognition of this fact has birthed a new wave of ecological poetry, dubbed eco-poetry. Eco-poetry deals with ecology not simply as a theme, but as an investigation of the relationship between nature and culture. American poet Forrest Gander best summarizes the intent of genre, writing "Maybe the development of environmental literacy, by which I mean a capacity for reading connections between the environment and its inhabitants, can be promoted by poetic literacy; maybe poetic literacy will be deepened through environmental literacy." Many of the poems in my collection, such as "A Political Climate," "Elephant Ears," and "The Circle of Life" were written according to this philosophy. In each poem, I directly address climate change and the environment as a political issue, grappling with the tragedy of climate change and my personal role and contribution to it.

Poetics

While the ideas and emotions in my writing are strictly my own, I draw upon a number of poets for inspiration and insight. By reading the work of poets that I love and that speak to me emotionally, I am able to identify the unique characteristics of their work that drive the emotional reaction. By understanding how they have used various poetic devices to craft

particular narratives and moods, I am able to develop an individual style that allows me to best communicate the intentions of my work.

When I write, the process typically begins after I am captured by the musical language of a single sentence or line. The poem grows from the line and is shaped by the sound. This fixation on poetic sound is perhaps why I am drawn to Tony Hoagland and his expert control of rhythm and tone. His poems beg to be read aloud. Thematically, his work explores the ailments of society. Hoagland explains that through his poetry, he “attempts to name the sources and architecture of suffering.” However, by incorporating an almost joyful, bouncing, lyrical rhythm with his sobering subject-matter, Hoagland subverts expectation in a way that engages and surprises the reader.

This balance is exemplified in “America,” where he writes “He says that even when he’s driving to the mall in his Isuzu/ Trooper with a gang of his friends, letting rap music pour over them/ Like a boiling Jacuzzi full of ballpeen hammers, even then he feels/ Buried alive, captured and suffocated in the folds/ Of the thick satin quilt of America/ And I wonder if this is a legitimate category of pain,/ or whether he is just spin doctoring a better grade.” Here, the use of alliteration, slant rhyme, and cacophony mimic the sound of hip-hop, emphasizing the image of letting “rap music pour over them,” and balancing the imagery of being “buried alive” and the overall theme of corruption of innocence.

In “Note to Reality,” he contends with the death of a friend, writing “When I looked at my blood under a microscope/ I could see truth multiplying over and over./ —Not police sirens, nor history books, not stage-three lymphoma persuaded me/ but your honeycombs and beetles; the dry blond fascicles of grass thrust up above the January snow.” His use of sibilance, the

repetition of hissing sounds in words, gives the work musicality and controls the tempo for the reader, increasing in speed as the last line is reached.

I make similar use of rhythm and lyricality in my collection. In “Cable Television,” I make heavy use of alliteration as a means to contrast and balance the subject of racialized violence,

“...like some kind of
Cronenberg, clawing their way out of the
pimplly alphabet soup of adolescence and
into a three-piece suit and polished leather loafers...”

“... and as his name scrolled across
the news crawler and the words turned to the screams
of his mother, we sat back and watched him writhe
and crawl between a bloodstain and a beating heart.”

This occurs again in “El Mojado,” where I write “but the brush is on fire/ and my feet are saguaro roots, and the sun/ is the barrel of a shotgun, and the vulture is a speck/ of gunpowder falling to the dirt.” Here, I use alliteration and rhythm to increase intensity and speed in the first lines, slowing down in the last. The intended effect is a poem that is pleasurable— almost fun—to read, despite being written from the perspective of a man fallen victim to the cruel immigration policies of the United States.

For the gold-standard of poetic storytelling, I look to William Stafford. He understands that one does not have to choose between accessibility and depth, and the beauty of his work lies in its simplicity. Stafford forgoes complexity in favor of a gentle voice and straightforward language, allowing the reader to immerse themselves, undistracted, in the beauty of the moment he has captured. Much of his work deals in the natural world, and the quiet calm of his poetic voice reflects the peaceful feeling of being alone in the wilderness.

In “Traveling through the Dark,” the narrator discovers a doe, struck dead by a car, on the side of the road: “I dragged her off; she was large in the belly./ My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—/ her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,/ alive, still, never to be born./ Beside that mountain road I hesitated.” Here, his quiet tone and simple vocabulary allow for the narrative to be the focus. He uses sensory images, the feeling of the doe, the hum of the car to capture his audience’s imagination. The story speaks for itself: the death of the doe, the fragility of the life of the fawn, the empathy of the narrator. Nothing more is needed.

Stafford also frequently explores the often fraught relationship between man and nature, emphasizing the damage we often inflict on the wilderness. When writing about the behaviors of man, he will often approach the topic through the lens of the wild. In his piece “At the Bomb Testing Site,” Stafford writes about the testing and development of the nuclear bomb by focusing on the experience of a desert lizard: “At noon in the desert a panting lizard/ waited for history, its elbows tense,/ watching the curve of a particular road/ as if something might happen.” In “Boom Town,” he writes about the boom and bust cycle of oil drilling in the American west through the experience of a snake: “Into any sound important/ a snake puts out its tongue;/ so at the edge of my hometown/ every snake listened./ And all night those oil well engines/ went talking into the dark;/ every beat fell through a snake,/ quivering to the end.”

I share Stafford’s reverence for the wilderness and often consider the non-human impact of our decisions. In “Drone Strike,” I write about the aftermath of a military drone strike from the perspective of a calf. The use of simple, idyllic natural imagery creates dissonance between the language of the poem and the reader’s knowledge of the truth of the damage inflicted by the strike.

“The earth screams.
A calf has escaped the pasture.

She presses her soft nose
to the tufts of dandelion
that grow by the road and
bleats for her mother.”

In poems “Elegy for My Brother,” and “Yesterday’s Newspaper,” I follow Stafford’s example and eschew flashy language and tone in service of the stories at the heart of each piece. In ‘Yesterday’s Newspaper,’ I use sensory details– “the rail worn gold beneath your palm,” “her hair white and stuck to your lips,” “the smell of figs/ of tobacco”– to build a vivid image in the reader’s mind. At the heart of “Elegy for My Brother” is the mentorship and admiration felt between older and younger siblings during childhood, and the pain felt when one is lost. The reader can easily empathize with the subject of the poem, and because of this I chose to focus on crafting a precise image in order to best capture a brief moment in time:

“But my brother would sit quietly, hunched
small over his matchstick, watching
the flame move closer to his skin until
the wood had all burned away, and only
the fire remained, and for a moment he held it
there, smoldering between his fingertips.”

For simplicity, brevity, and metaphor, I look to Wendell Berry. A farmer, environmental advocate, and the father of ecological poetry, Berry’s writing clearly and consistently reflects his deeply held values. Throughout his work, his poetic style and theme stay essentially the same: his simple language and short lines read in a slow, steady cadence, and his reverence for the natural world is apparent. He advocates unwaveringly for a close, deeply personal relationship between man and the land s/he inhabits.

In his poem “The Dead Calf,” he addresses this relationship directly. The piece begins by describing a calf found “Dead at the pasture edge,/ his head without eyes, becalmed,/ on the grass.” Then, the narrative moves from the calf to the narrator who found him, who talks about

the horror felt towards the notion of death: "...In me/ is where the horror is. In my mind/ he does not yield. I cannot believe/ the deep peace that has come to him./ I am afraid that where the light/ is torn there is a wound." Here, Berry draws a comparison between death as a natural part of life and death as the horror that lurks in the human consciousness. The poem finishes with the lines "May all dead things lie down in me/ and be at peace, as in the ground."

The poem highlights the division Berry sees between man and the natural world and the damage this divide has caused for the human psyche. He uses simple, straightforward language, wasting no words. Despite the surreal imagery in the second stanza, "There is a darkness in the soul/ that loves the eyes. There is a light/ in the mind that sees only light," the poem reads simply and Berry's message is made clear. His abstinence from flair and dedication to writing directly and concisely allows him to curate the precise imagery and messaging he wants to convey to his reader. By writing in this style, his poetry reflects his own philosophical dedication to living simply and intentionally.

Most lines in Berry's poems are only four to five words long, yet every line carries more than its own weight, each communicating the maximum amount of information in the fewest words. His precise diction and expert use of metaphor and simile allow him to communicate both semantically and aesthetically, often tying the realities of the natural world and the internal experience of man inextricably together. In his poem "Rain Crow," he uses the imagery of a crow warning of rain in a drought-stricken land to write about hope in a time of despair. Berry opens by depicting the passing of time as a destructive phenomenon "The pendulum sun swing/ In arcs of dying days." In nine words, he depicts the visual imagery of the sun moving across a barren, cloudless sky while simultaneously describing the destruction it causes in its path. The lines "A circle of buzzards rode,/ Shadows of death on wind/ wound the valley up," conjure both

the feeling of dread and the imagery of a drought. In the final stanza, he depicts the feeling of hope and renewal by likening it to birth in springtime, writing “When fresh fields lay to sun/
Like a clutch of eggs before/ the warmth of the hatching hen.”

W.S. Merwin shares in Wendell Berry’s preoccupation with man’s relationship to the wilderness. Both men write to preserve the natural world they so love. On the purpose of writing poetry, Merwin once said, “I think there’s a kind of desperate hope built into poetry now that one really wants, hopelessly, to save the world. One is trying to say everything that can be said for the things that one loves while there’s still time.” When reading his work, one can certainly sense him grasping at the beauty he saw in the world, recording and preserving particular images and small moments in time. This is particularly true in his later work, wherein Merwin rejects formal syntax and the use of punctuation in favor of fluidity and aesthetics. Relying only on line breaks, Merwin’s work reads almost as a fleeting memory, each line and image flowing into the next. This imparts an almost ethereal quality, despite the concreteness of his language.

His 1994 poem “The Speed of Light,” is visually intimidating— a single stanza with no punctuation, the piece initially seems to lack cohesion. Merwin moves quickly from one scene to the next, mimicking the feeling of time swiftly passing by. The poem begins “So gradual in those summers was the going/ of the age it seemed that the long days setting out/ when the stars faded over the mountains were not/ leaving us even as the birds woke in full song and the dew,” and continues to read as a single thought. Merwin avoids finishing a thought at the end of a line, instead finishing the line with the beginning of a new image, thusly propelling the poem ever more quickly forward. The movement continues to pick up pace, “ we did not see that the swallows flashing and the sparks/ of their cries were fast in the spokes of the hollow/ wheel that was turning and turning us taking us/ all away as one with the tires of the baker's van/ where the

wheels of bread were stacked like days in calendars/ coming and going all at once we did not hear.” Here, the days move from passing slowly to being “stacked like wheels of bread,” and the bird move from waking to “swallows flashing,” thus upping the intensity of the piece. He concludes at dusk, “the village at sundown calling their animals home/ and then the bats after dark and the silence on its road.” In the final lines, the movement slows once again, and finally stops. The imagery moves from hectic to silent as the night falls and the narrative concludes.

While I do not share Merwin’s ability to artfully defy syntactical and grammatical norms, I do look to him to understand how form, punctuation, and line breaks can alter the reader’s experience when reading poem and ultimately bolster or negate the intended message of the piece. In the poem “Edisto Beach in January,” I am intentional with my use of punctuation, choosing to write the first two stanzas as complete sentences, while grouping the final four as a single sentence, unifying them as a single narrative while using the stanza and line breaks to create emphasis. In “It Never Happens This Way,” I experiment by writing a poem containing only a single sentence to evoke a more dreamlike mood. In “How to Grieve,” I write only in questions in order to communicate the messy, nonlinear emotional progression of bereavement. In each of these pieces, the unusual use of form communicates something about the way the poem is meant to be read and experienced in a way that vocabulary cannot.

I began writing poetry last year much in the same way one would make their way around a dark room— arms outstretched, tentatively feeling my way through space I knew nothing about. While I understood what types of poems I enjoyed, I understood little about the components that made them enjoyable. When writing, I stumbled blindly until finding the occasional piece worth sharing. In working on this thesis, it is as though I have managed to find an unlocked door and

allow a bit of light in. Each poet that I admire has illuminated an aspect of the craft – from Stafford’s unpretentious storytelling and Berry’s simple precision to Merwin’s willingness to break the rules and Hoagland’s musicality and playful language – that I have been able to learn from and apply to my own work. While my approach to my writing has certainly progressed, my intention from the beginning has remained the same. I write to understand, to dissect, to interact with politics, the environment, my relationships, emotions, with all the “managed spectacles,” as Adrienne Rich wrote. While I am still painfully distant from a mastery of this craft, I believe that through this thesis I have begun to understand the path to take in order to get there.

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