

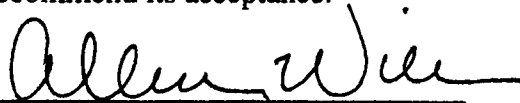
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Toby Emert (Gordon M. Emert, Jr.) entitled "Something Borrowed." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

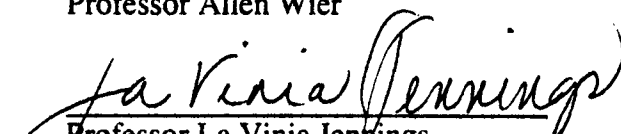


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We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:



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Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

SOMETHING BORROWED

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Toby Emert (Gordon M. Emert, Jr.)
July 1996

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is difficult to know exactly who I should thank here. So many people have influenced this work and my commitment to this project. I should start though, I think, with Susan Bright, poet and editor and publisher of Plain View Press in Austin, Texas. It is the creative writing class that I took from Susan four years ago that initially re-ignited my need to write. And her interest in my poetry that continued to fuel the work that followed. I also thank Katherine Stuart, a former teacher, a friend and a colleague for having the courage to admit that poetry is an animal living wild in some of us--she saw its glint in my eye. And I especially thank Marilyn Kallet, the angel who has visited me repeatedly throughout the course of this manuscript with messages of hope and encouragement.

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Abstract

I recall hearing that newborn infants literally need to be touched, caressed, understand love through the touch--that it is the body that responds to the touch, that it is the body of the infant that knows the truth of the hand or cheek touching it. The poems in this manuscript chronicle in some small way the beginning of an understanding: that the physical body knows truth when it is presented and that the language of the body is palpably greedy and is ultimately the language of reality. The speakers in these poems try on the masks of many, borrowing personas, searching for any that fit well, any that make it easier to understand this language of survival.

We begin to live when we conceive life as tragedy.

--William Butler Yeats

PREFACE

It's December 1995 and I'm spending a few days in New York City--seeing plays, shopping, visiting museums. I have been at the Met for the afternoon and wander into a garden room--warm despite the bitterness of the December wind outside the arching glass ceiling. In front of me is an enormous sculpture of two men wrestling. They are nude. And I wonder at the smallness of their penises and testicles in relation to the gargantuan proportions of their buttocks and twisting limbs. Their legs are wrapped around each other tightly. Pain and pleasure in their faces. For a moment I am in love with these fighting men and the noisy garden where they clasp each other unabashedly and wince. I want badly to run my palms along the full length of their bodies--scalp to heel--to feel the tortured muscles straining, the furor frozen within each tendon and ligament. Instead I write about them. I borrow from them what I can for the few minutes that we interact. I watch them tumble and growl, blood gathering in their toes as they brace their feet against the floor in an effort to gain the edge that may mean victory. Sweat dripping into their eyes, running into the corners of their mouths, dropping onto the cold floor. I see the blood on one man's arm--an unintentional scratch from his opponent. I witness the struggle, each man searching for the vulnerabilities of the other, how they use their bodies to discern what the kind heart cannot understand. The body knows. Toes have instinct. Fingers curl in sleep. Limbs shiver when cold. "Listen to the body," I hear the men whispering to me. "Truth resides in the breath you breathe; it really is that simple."

"Tell me again," I write. "I don't think I understand you yet."

"You will," they say. "Be patient. Just touch. Be touched."



Touching is what I do in the poetry in this collection. Mostly I am touching myself in places that have been forbidden before. Or neglected. Or just not considered worth touching. Like the inside of my ankle where the blue veins are near the surface of the skin; how warm the blood is as it runs under my fingers. The poetry reminds me to touch my ankle. And to marvel at what I find.

Plato suggests that the aim of drama is catharsis. That is, for me, the aim of this writing--to somehow reconstruct moments and understand the meaning in them. Actually, it's only in the writing that I feel I live the moment at all. The time that I'm sitting admiring sculpture I don't know what it means to be sitting admiring sculpture. It's only in the writing about the experience that I know anything about what it meant. The poems let me live--again. Breathe. The lines are connected to breath--to remembering to breathe: Inhale. Release and cleanse. Survive.

The image I have of myself as writer is knotted with the image of the sad child. And it is often the child's voice who speaks to me in lines of poetry. I dare to ascribe specific gender to the child; it is an amalgamation of male and female, fully vulnerable and fully vibrant. When the child comes, the pain is evident in its limbs--the arms are crooked and the legs bent so that the child often sits and holds itself and rocks. This child understands Yeats. This child is the seer, shaman, truthgiver, a being unafraid to admit a fathomless sense of the tragic. The child understands that knowledge is inherently tied to pain, that knowing any truth often requires vast suffering. And that suffering sometimes reveals truth.

The poems in this manuscript have agendas then. Each is a borrower, trying on different truths like new clothes. Each is an attempt for the speaker to get at truth,

but the only way the speaker knows to understand any reality is to make up the reality by renarrating the events of which the poems speak. By re-encoding the circumstances and re-establishing motives and movements, the speaker relives the incidences and ultimately renegotiates the reality of each moment, claiming it and re-enlivening it.

The subjects vary, of course, as does the form and style, though some of the poems are distinctly tied to a narrative tradition. My family are all fine storytellers. Some of the poems included in this manuscript draw on my need to repeat the story over and over until the teller becomes almost incidental to the story. Until the characters, plot lines, situations live on their own--somehow disconnected from the teller. The birth of some mite of truth.

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☛ DREAM OF APOCALYPSE

Everything begins with bees:
an old man buying a box of bees
mail order from a catalogue,
their coming with the postman,
who bounces the box
on the tips of his fingers
like a child balancing a balloon.
The man opening the box, unafraid of being stung,
taking out one bee, holding it between the thumb
and index finger of his right hand,
flicking the bee away, into the air.

The sky, like slate (flat and gray), shattering
into a thousand hungry blackbirds.

☛ BOY: NUMBER ONE

Ashen, still
fire blazing in his fingertips,
his toes, earlobes, nipples

Through the window
ironwood trees at the edge of the pasture
their thin trunks scarred
by nails, barbed wire, fence staples
growing harder, taller, thicker
among the pines

When the man's tongue enters him
the boy opens his eyes
watches the shadows of trees
on the ceiling
gray hard trunks
attenuating at the edge
of the sparkle, crackle, hiss of flames

❧ BLIZZARD

Moss,
 lichens,
 dust-colored fungi
grow
 like errant hairs
 on the boy's back;
he cries.

I pour
 cups of water
 over his shoulders
and his head;
 he hunkers down,
 chest touching his knees.
dripping.

The room
 is a sponge
 saturated with anger,
with grief.

In another part
 of the house,
 the father
sits at his grinding wheel.
 foot pumping the pedal
 that spins bone-colored stone.
its nicks and chinks
 smoothed.

He leans
 toward the stone,
 watches it circle,
whistles
 long piercing notes.

The boy
 touches my hand
 lays his head
against my knee.

We shiver
 like children
 come in from the blizzard.

☛ THOMAS EAKINS, FIGURE ARTIST

Eakins was a lover of the body
the muscles, bones, curves, planes,
the tenderness of the tongue,
the roundness of thumbs
and the puncture-wound navel.
His pen loved paper--
ink rubbing against bark--
running its length in smooth precision,
searching to know
all the dimples,
all the dark places.

Arcadia. Oil on canvas. c. 1883. 38 3/4" X 45 1/2"
 Thomas Eakins, American, 1844 -1916

- Paradise: boys, naked, spent, belly-down / all lean shoulder bones

and spines / grass between their toes / drying on the river bank.

I'm six, skinny, breathless / your hands tighten about my wrists / bone against flesh against flesh. / You unbutton your shirt, lie on top of me / the hair on your chest pricks at my lips / your tongue, warm, stings my neck. / Your mouth on me / eating / eating / eating. / You are in me like the pebble is in the boulder / part of me that's nothing unless I'm broken. / Your whispers / hot sand / melting / *Pretend I'm a blade of grass. / I'm green. How does green smell? / Clean like clover. / And how do I taste? / Like licorice on my tongue. / And how do I feel? / Warm rainwater in the drainspout / spilling over / flooding a green patch of ground /*

and spines / grass between their toes / drying on the river bank.

- Paradise: boys, naked, spent, belly-down / all lean shoulder bones

☛ A CHILD VIEWS A JACKSON POLLOCK PAINTING

He wets his finger inside his lips,
snakes it along a line of bones
shattered in the hurricane of desperate strokes
slung against the canvas: curving and squirming,
meeting, being met, snarling and growling, growing
into each other, touching,
being touched.

☛ PHOTOGRAPH OF CHILD LAUGHING

Pretty
a boy can be
short hair
brown eyes

breaking open

you make me cry
remembering
the reason
you laugh

☪ DREAMING THE DEAD

The night after his funeral I found my father
sitting naked, knees up, weaving dust and weeds,
thick fingers bleeding beneath the nails.
I touched the curve of his ears, ran my hand
across the scars in his scalp. I knelt to press
my chest against his spine, to pull him into me,
to soothe his moving fingers. He rocked backward
into my arms, the odor of soap and urine, touching me.

And when I kissed his head, breathed into the nape
of his neck, my mouth drawing moisture from his skin,
tiny blisters bloomed on my tongue:
petals, like small thumbs, pushing my teeth
against the skin of my jaws, swelling past my lips,
twisting in the dark toward the crevice of light.

☛ APRIL

At last, in the cruel
bloom of April,
as irises bent and broke
in the wind outside,
my father opened his eyes,
his long sleep like rain
wet on his lashes.
He carved out of the air
with his hands
a space the size of an oak leaf,
blew into that space
breath, so swollen with will,
with wanting, it burst.
We felt wind pass through us,
a shadow's lips against our own.

☛ BRAIN CANCER

November: the wheat Father had planted
in the low grounds greening, restless
beneath a clean cloth of snow.

We gathered walnuts from the pasture
in bushel baskets; poured them in the road

drove over them, backward and forward
till their green hulls cracked
and exposed the wrinkled shells inside.
We raked nuts from husks that stained our fingers
hammered out the bittersweet meats and nibbled.

At night we burned the debris
standing with our backs to the fire.
Inside Father dozed, dreamless
the blanket of his thoughts
unravelling.

☪ DREAM OF FATHER

Tonight he waits silent
on the bed's edge and I
approach him
from behind,
gather the weight
of his hair in my arms.
I plait a twine of purple
clover into the sinewy
black braid dangling
against his back
and he turns to me,
presses a feather to my palm.
"A whole herd of horses sleep
in your head," he tells me.
"Wake them kindly
and lead them to water.
They'll return
when they need to."

☛ TOBACCO BARN BLUES

Miss Ludie Taylor sits and tongues the gape
in the top plate of her dentures.
slides her black-bottomed tongue
past the chink in the pink gumline.
spits, pauses, wipes her mouth on a rag,
looks stumped, like she's gone and lost
the one thing she hunted herself skinny trying to find.
She reaches for the lard tin beside her chair,
rubs her dry palms together,
softening up her cracked thumbs with grease,
strips a tobacco stalk clean of its sticky leaves,
tosses the naked snake of a stick
on the growing pile near her rubber boots.

She watches Old J.T. Jones pass some worn-out tale
around the circle of laughing wrinkled faces.
Her rheumy eyes still and dark,
flat, emptied of light and longing.
She makes her own rhythm as she works:
all done as natural as scratching when it itches.

She could toss a tale, if she had a mind to.
Not about any angus calf born with a tail in the middle of its back,
mad mongrel dogs foaming at the mouth and chewing their tongues off,
days so hot hen house eggs'd fry in the nest before they were gathered,
not about dropping a dried snakeskin down some fool's shirt,
or giggling a gunnysack full of looney bullfrogs under a June moon.

She'd tell about one night way past two,
somebody banging on her kitchen door
and waking from a bad dream in a sweat,
yelling to find out who's there and nobody answering,
just the knocking getting louder
like the hinges would break off the door any minute
and reaching under her bed
for the twelve gauge,
remembering the keyhole blown open,
swallowing phlegm and spit
then vomit,
her son King, her itty baby boy,
grown up into a beggar and blowhard,
stupid drunk on apple brandy,
laying in a pile outside,
wet with something, whimpering.

☛ SONNET FOR RUBY ANNE

--for my grandmother Ruby Anne Loveday Emert

You were always the last to eat.
You'd wait the kitchen table till the men
had cleaned their plates of salty meat,
pinto beans, tomatoes, tangy as sin,
fried okra, mustard greens, rhubarb cobbler,
blessed as always with the same mumbled grace
your children learned to pray as toddlers.
Silent, you'd watch them eat, the manly pace.
When they'd all done, you'd wipe the tablecloth,
find "Hymn Time" on the radio and hum,
bumbling the words of "The Old Rugged Cross."
You'd take the hidden plate of cornbread from
the stove--the staple of your simple diet--
pleased with the job you'd done and the quiet.

☛ THOUGHTS AFTER OUR LAST VISIT

I think of summer when I see you:
ignoring the shade in the front yard
nursing afternoons dry
on the brown vinyl sofa
our legs sweaty, eyes heavy.
I'd turn my face to the window fan
open my eyes wide
dry them in the whirl of air
till I couldn't keep from blinking.
You'd lick your thumbs, turn newspaper pages,
your lips soundless wings beating
in the sticky quiet
that was our safe place,
our sanctuary.

I dream now of words arranged
inside you like snap beans
on the shelves of the pantry:
stuffed in, packed down,
salted, steamed, and stored away
for the winter
no one will live
to tell us both about.

☞ LOVE LETTER TWO YEARS LATE

Winters in Cairns, Australia,
birds the color of overripe tangerines flock
among the branches of the one tree
growing in a circle of downtown shops.
The whistle-song of black beaks so loud
children cackle and point,
gather beneath the tree
and spin like pennies.

Two years ago I stood and watched these birds, these children
and you came flying to me there, swooping down
so close I felt the whoosh inside my chest,
lost my breath, could not speak.
Songs resonated up from my belly,
songs even these birds cannot know
of how when one man loves the body of another man--
the way I loved yours--the way the dimples of my hips
loved the ridges of your thighs,
bits of the world, perhaps the size of flattened marbles,
hurtle toward the sun,
form an eclipse the shape of my thumbnail
so slight no one would notice
were not orange birds to congregate and whistle in winter
in Cairns, were not children to stop and dance.

☯ LEAVING

I can't hold you with one hand.
Your cracked crystal innards draw me
as heat is drawn to height.
I see your small flaws:
the clouds in your veins,
your light only a reflection in my hands

There's a mountain in your eye.
but a plateau fills you up.

☛ THE TAROT: THE FOOL

I show you the bronze soles of my feet
(well, my right foot, at least).
You send your lion to gnaw at my thigh.
Behind me, two babies embrace
beneath four lilac blossoms.
Butterflies rope my neck:
once, twice, more than four times.
It's snowing in a yellow sky.
The horizon hits my knees.
I hold one large diamond
in the fingers of my right hand.
A bird's wing grazes my chest
and a maple leaf rests
in my left palm.
Alligators bite the light.
My shoulders weary
with the weight of the runes.
The bird of peace moves
in the heart-shaped air.
Please cut off my horns
and put my eyes back in place;
I'll give you some shards of fire
if you do.

☛ MATISSE'S DANCE, 1909

Woman who sings:

*Vision not the image endures.
"The word is elegy to the thing it signifies."
Hands don't join they touch.*

Woman who remembers:

*Matisse picked up his chalk
and drew my feet dancing,
on the silk ashes of the bonfire.*

Woman who stumbles:

*Enter the green earth wailing,
breathless as bees
carrying sweet crumbs between their legs*

Woman who speaks:

*In silence is sustenance:
life life life
the only words I know.*

Woman who listens:

*A sound like blinking eyes
openandshut openandshut openandshut lashes humming
Give me your hand I'll take you.*

☛ THE SCARECROW'S SONG

Tie me high in the limbs of a sycamore tree
and slice the soles from my shoddy shoes.
Free my stumpy toes to slurp up air.
Stitch the legs of my mud-marked dungarees
together; bind them tight with twine
at the ankles; sear the wounds round as eyes
shut, then call the dogs to dinner.
Purchase any handkerchief for my swollen neck
and stain my eyelids
with violets crushed liquid
between your thumb and forefinger.
Cut open my navel and note all you can see:
my feather tick body too tall to make love to.
Paint my nails nicely. Maybe with houses and sheep
in the field out back. Or simple feasts of pumpkin and yams.
Gamble for the speckled birds' eggs in my pocket.
Pop colored corn and whistle off-key till the sky disintegrates,
bluejays cease mating.
Burrow in close; I want to hear your straw heart waiting to beat.

Together, we'll pin our days to the line
till they're dried chaff, husks left in the sun,
stems, not fruit, on the vine,
cursing the wheat in the field,
the strawberries on the hill,
the ducks on the pond,
the simple fact we live.

☛ SHORT STORY

I will name you: Witchwoman,
your eyes, the color of molasses, banana-pepper
lips a steamy yellow, earrings dangling
like exclamation points from your lobes.
You open your book to read to me:
I stare at the fruit -filled pages.

I arrange a still life, preparing to draw.
I show you where the blueberries have dried
around the stem. You complain you can't find
any ripe ones and we argue over colors:
burgundy for the banana, green
for the pomegranate seeds, yellow
for peaches, tomatoes, cranberries.
I close my eyes, shake my head "no."
hold out the crayons. You take the box from my hands.

My fingers twine like grapevines toward your face,
wind about your waist, your elbows, your ankles.
You whistle my name and I am blinded.

☘ IRIS

folded neatly together
in a roundness
so soft
the breeze could wound it

tender as an iris
you press your hand to mine

☯ CHINESE FISH

for Rosemary

Splattering of gold filament
sieved words
your name among them

Scattered stones and oyster shells
beneath the ancient flower folks
fish, belly to belly

Suffused by blue sand and ice
flowers drown
mouths open

Watery vowels
hum and glisten in cold sunlight

☛ FOUR WORLDS

She hands him four worlds:
rain-soaked sunlight and rust.

He blots his tongue
tender to his hand's heel.

Angels hold their breath.

☪ PEPPERMINT

I.

You stand in the snow
barefoot, your left knee
showing through the only hole
in your favorite blue jeans:
your morning hair fingering your back
then the sky behind you.
Something like confetti, candy corn in my head.
diluting the image, running it off the pages.
My will, the wind's will.

II.

I reach to you in the seven ways I know how:
quilting a bed a pink geraniums,
collecting fire shards,
swallowing lightning,
remembering to gulp down the thunder too,
biting the light as night comes on,
sleeping with the birds,
resting inside my papier mache skin till dawn
when I can tear through the paper and paste
and hum the tune of the song you once sang me.
And still, in my mind, it's the limbs of an elm tree
that cradle your form--
not my arms.

III.

I'm tasting peppermint--the first time I met you
you gave me a peppermint and I ate it,
even though I didn't like it.
I ate it all and asked you for another one.
Which you slipped from your coat pocket
to my hand, slowly,
and I was warm liquid
candle wax melting--
today, I open my mouth and sizzle
a snowflake to soothe the flame.

IV.

Still standing in the snow,
you call my name
and I hear you and misremember our past,
thinking of one day when
we scattered peacocks with our loving.

☞ TEARING THE WIND

I've only held the hand of one dying man.
I wanted to tear the wind in two.
I think he might have noticed that.

In a corner across the room, I hear myself smiling.
I wink with my right eye, then my left.
I'm not paying any attention.

Behind my back, I call myself names.
Sticks and stones don't bruise as bad.
Hand me a rock, please.

My faces turn like leaves in a storm.
Switch on the calliope of blind eyes.
Sew darkness into the seam between my lips.

I walk on my mirror image--toe to toe, heel to heel.
Standing above me it's hard to see my face.
Burn the last candle for light.

I lie on my back in a bowl of colored marbles.
I'm threading a needle with clouds.
I remember what I've been told--even death has to eat.

☞ RECOGNITION

Early morning I find myself
standing at the window,
caught in a web of sunlight,
veins of frost melting from the glass.
slowly, like velvet unwrinkling.

I recall a photograph I've seen once--
an Easter Sunday long passed:
you're standing with your back
to my father's front,
a white glove in your hand,
his arm draped over your shoulder
like a scarf,
the two of you
frozen in mid-movement
like Daphne
chased by Apollo.

I'm spooked with all I see in the thawing panes:
a ghost smile, photograph-ready,
framed with shadows.

I close my eyes
and open them again, slowly.
Two, three, four times.
Each time though,
through my lids,
I see, taste, touch
the light.

☛ DISAPPEARING ACT

When the whippoorwills sing, he thinks.
he may unhinge his legs and move, catch a firefly,
hold it tight in his hands, blow on its belly,
and make his pact with the moon: "I'll stay if you do."
Or he may practice the only magic he knows:
a simple disappearing act, vanishing through the hole
he claws in the dark sky, pulling his shadow in after him.

VITA

Gordon M. Emert, Jr. (Toby) was born in the small town of Farnville in Virginia. He holds the Bachelor of Arts in English from Longwood College and the Master's of Education from The College of William and Mary. His poetry has appeared in local, regional, and national journals and his academic writing can be found in *The Journal of College Student Development* and the book *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia*, forthcoming from Columbia University Press.