

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jesse Kendall Graves entitled "Field Portrait." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Arthur Smith , Major Professor

We have read this dissertation  
and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet

Amy Billone

David Tandy

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges  
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

*Field Portrait:*  
*Poems*

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jesse Kendall Graves  
August 2008

## **Dedication**

These poems are dedicated to the cornerstones of my work: my mother and father Joyce Graves and Hugh Graves, and my wife and daughter, Lisa Graves and Chloe Graves.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many who people who enabled me to write the poems and critical introduction in this dissertation. I am particularly grateful to Professor Arthur Smith, who directed my dissertation with all the care and guidance of a true mentor, and for the continued support he has given to my poems since I first studied with him as an undergraduate. I would like to thank Professor Marilyn Kallet for her sustaining kindness and for her encouragement that I always keep reaching for new registers in my poetic voice. I thank Professor Amy Billone for her thoughtful interpretations of my poems, and her rich historical and theoretical understanding of poetry. I thank Professor David Tandy for contributing the breadth of his learning, particularly in the lyric poetry of ancient Greece, to my dissertation project.

A number of professors have helped direct my thinking about poetry and poetics, including Allen Dunn, Richard Finneran, Jack Gilbert, and B.J. Leggett at the University of Tennessee, and A.R. Ammons, Roger Gilbert, and Kenneth McClane at Cornell University.

Two poets, Jeff Daniel Marion and Robert Morgan, deserve special thanks for the inspiration and encouragement they have given to my writing, and also for their friendship and the model their poetry has provided me.

Many friends read these poems and provided irreplaceable support and insight: Joseph Campana, Judy Loest, Linda Parsons Marion, Deb Scaperoth, Steve Sparks, Randall Wilhelm, and William Wright.

I could never have written these poems without the love and kindness of my wife Lisa and my daughter Chloe, my parents, my brother and sister, and the memories of my uncle Gerald Graves and my grandmothers Bonnie Graves and Edith Houston.

Work in this manuscript has appeared, sometimes in different forms, in the following journals:

“Digging the Pond,” *Tar River Poetry*, forthcoming 2009

“Equations,” *descant*, forthcoming 2008

“My Sister at Sea,” *South Carolina Review*, forthcoming 2008

“Field Portrait,” *Connecticut Review*, forthcoming 2008

“Lattice Work: Formal Tendencies in the Recent Poetry of Robert Morgan and Ron Rash,” (essay) *Southern Quarterly*, (45:1)

“Tennessee Landscape with Blighted Pine,” *Southern Quarterly*, (45:1)

“Firing Order,” *Southern Quarterly*, (45:1)  
“River Gods,” *Southern Quarterly*, (45:1)  
“Late Summer Woodcut,” *Potomac Review*, (Issue 43)  
“Wrightsville Beach,” *Pisgah Review*, (2.1)  
“For the Frozen Wood,” *Pisgah Review*, (2.1)  
“His Confession,” *Bat City Review*, (Vol. 3)  
“The Sunken Mill,” *CrossRoads: A Southern Culture Annual*, Mercer University Press, 2006  
“Picture It,” *New Millennium Writings*, (16:1)  
“Detroit Muscle,” *Now & Then*, (21:2)  
“River Gods,” *Low Explosions: An Anthology of Writings on the Body* (2006)  
“Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake,” *New Millennium Writings*, (15:1)  
“Red Lines,” *Metro Pulse (Knoxville Bound feature)*, (14:48)  
“Blueprints,” *Knoxville Bound: A Collection of Literary Works Inspired by Knoxville, Tennessee* (2005)  
“Red Lines,” *Knoxville Bound: A Collection of Literary Works Inspired by Knoxville, Tennessee* (2005)  
“Trade,” *Southern Poetry Review*, (41:2)  
“The Upper Ridge,” *The Sow’s Ear Poetry Review*, (12:2)  
“The Locust Bush,” *The Sow’s Ear Poetry Review*, (12:2)  
“West of Raleigh,” *Roanoke Review*, (27:1)  
“Taylor’s Grove,” *Roanoke Review*, (27:1)

## Abstract

This creative dissertation is a collection of original poems entitled *Field Portrait*. The poems in *Field Portrait* emerge from a long apprenticeship to the aesthetics of poetry, and to the study of how work, family, history, community, and landscape have been represented by poets in the western literary tradition. Many of the poems in *Field Portrait* are set in rural eastern Tennessee where I grew up, but several poems respond to other places I have lived and visited, such as upstate New York and New Orleans, Louisiana. My poems aspire to an integrated relationship between description and perception, in which the eye of the speaker observes, the mind responds and interacts, and the eye sees again with an enhanced perspective. The work in *Field Portrait* represents my writing over the course of several years and employs a variety of formal and thematic approaches, and it strives to create art from the diverse experiences of a life closely attuned to the past and perpetually responsive to the present.

The critical introduction situates my poems within the framework of contemporary American lyric poetry, with close readings of how particular poets like Jack Gilbert, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Robert Morgan create a sense of authority through voice, evoke grief at the loss of loved ones, and depict transformative interactions with landscape. A primary goal in the introduction has been to trace a lineage of lyric poetry from its origins in Greek fragments, dating as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, through the great Roman Odes, Renaissance pastoralism, Romantic lyrics of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, American transcendentalism, and culminating in the descriptive-meditative personal lyrics of modern and contemporary poetry. I consider this poetic thread, suggesting it as the model for my own poems, as it has been examined by such critics as M. H. Abrams, W. R. Johnson, Paul Oppenheimer, and Helen Vendler. This expressive mode of poetry represents a central lyric impulse that focuses on the perception of a particular speaker, personal address to an auditor, evoking the texture of lived experience, emotional consequence, and the quest for intellectual significance.

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# ***Field Portrait: An Introduction***

## **I. Critical Introduction and Overview**

In his 1965 essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” M.H. Abrams surmises the difference between the “local poem,” a phrase he borrows from Dr. Samuel Johnson, of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and a new kind of poem that begins in the 1790s and embodies some of the greatest achievements of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. Abrams calls this new type of poem “the greater Romantic lyric,” and notes that chief among its qualities is a pattern, an “out-in-out process in which the mind confronts nature and the interplay constitutes the poem.” (78) Prior to the invention of this new mode of lyric, the “local poem” was merely a descriptive passage in which the speaker of the poem would look upon a natural setting, attempt to accurately describe it, and then relate it to some personal memory or moral sentiment. The interplay between mind and environment is what makes the “greater Romantic lyric” distinct from earlier forms of lyric poetry. Abrams suggests that the new approach found its origins in Coleridge’s disdain for dualisms of any kind, for instance, between body and mind, thought and action, or interior and exterior. The “greater Romantic lyric” initiated an expressive mode of poetry that integrates the speaker of a poem with his or her environment, thus enabling the poem to become what Wallace

Stevens, the great twentieth century Romantic, in his poem “Of Modern Poetry,” called “the act of the mind.”

The poems in my dissertation manuscript, *Field Portrait*, aspire to the same integrated relationship between description and perception, in which the eye of the speaker observes, the mind responds and interacts, then the eye sees again, this time with an enhanced perspective. My poems often have definite physical settings and I try very hard to create the environments in which the occasions of the poems take place, but I am also invested in the interplay between the descriptive setting and the experience of the speaker. Setting in my poems is very rarely simply backdrop, but often provides stimulus to the mind or actions of the speaker. In his book *The Idea of Lyric*, W. R. Johnson discusses the way in which lyric imagery reaches beyond the doctrine of mimesis into the complex exchange of artistic creation. Johnson says:

When Paul Cezanne designed that garment tossed  
randomly on that chair, he was not trying to reproduce, to  
represent, the naturalistic look of that garment on that chair;  
rather, he was, like the cave dweller and the Greek sculptor,  
patterning what he and, potentially, all humans see and feel  
and think about their lives; he was, in the simplest and  
profoundest sense of the word, *helping* us to *see* chairs and  
garments as they are, life as it is, ourselves as we are. (13)

Poetry is a re-imagining as well as a reflection of an occasion, and a strong poem must be able to describe its environment accurately, and provide therein the canvas for the lived experience of its speaker.

The lyric poem in the early twenty-first century resembles the native poplar tree, which thrives because of its many branchings. In fact, a great deal of the lyric mode's strength derives from the varieties of interpretation and implementation forced upon it by poets with considerably differing sensibilities. A definite ambition for my work is that it might demonstrate range within certain parameters, that it engages the means of lyric poetry as well as the historical accumulation of years of engaged and attentive reading. A lyric poet's voice emerges out of a tradition of reading and responding to consequential poems that precede him or her, and in my case, this goes as far back as the ancient Greek lyrics of Sappho and Archilochus, and continues up through an ongoing engagement with the current issues of such literary journals as *American Poetry Review*, *Lyric*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. I have narrowed my field of readings for this critical introduction to represent the work that most serves as influence and inspiration for my poems, and intend to place my poems within a framework and a lineage of the poetry I have admired and from which I have learned my art and my craft.

A primary drive in my poems has been a pursuit of the question of what to do with the memories of people and places that are now lost to me. This is the essence of elegiac poetry, but also one of the historical foundations of the lyric mode. I have paid special attention to those modern and contemporary poets who are most open to regarding loss, and to identifying the emotions brought to bear on the self when loss is confronted. Two central concerns in my poetry are the grief at losing a loved family member, and the sense of upheaval when a landscape, or an entire community gets displaced, which happened to my immediate ancestors when the Tennessee Valley Authority flooded miles and miles of farmland for the construction of a series of dams in

the 1930's. Poets who examine loss on a personal level, as well as on the level of community and landscape, emerge as the greatest influence on my work, and I have studied some of them, such as Charles Wright and Tomas Transtromer, in great detail. I have tried to learn from these master poets how avoid the pitfall of sentimentality, how to approach material that has significant emotional risk without falling into an exaggerated sense of import.

In his essay "The Pastoral: First and Last Things." David Baker considers the contemporary misuse of the term pastoral as a noun, such that it is a catchall for any poem with nature in it. Baker gives a long historical account of the form, with a useful view at how and where it began:

Theocritus and his pastoral lyrics are a slightly more recent development than the three ur-forms of the lyric. We might date the erotic poem back to Sappho, on Lesbos, around 600 BC. We can take the written elegy back at least to Simonides of Keos, in the early 500; BC, although we can trace the choral elegy back to Archilochus in the latter half of the eighth century BC, on Paros. And Pindar formed his great odes in the late 400; BC. Theocritus was born in about 300 BC. (135)

For Baker, the continuing value of the pastoral is its adaptability to any age, but I find the persistence and continuity of the genre, especially in modified forms, to be its most striking characteristic. The pastoral impulse was originally one of local celebration, and was then turned inward toward a more meditative form by the same need that created the

“greater Romantic lyric.” The permanence of the lyric mode of poetry derives from its propensity for looking back, and for granting perspective on time and loss from the present.

In the preface to her 1995 book *Sappho Is Burning*, Page duBois makes a remarkable claim on the importance of historical understanding. She says of Sappho:

She stands for me a sign of why we still need history, why we should not be satisfied with a one-dimensional, atemporal, global postmodern culture, why the study of history, of distant times and distant places can provide us the experience of difference, a productive memory of latent fragments of human being, now remote but recoverable through our inquiry into what we have lost. (ix)

Sappho remains a major voice in the evolution of lyric poetry not simply because she appears at the beginning of the lineage, but because she presents a recognizable perspective, in spite of her work arriving to us in fragments. Sappho predates the pastoral of Theocritus, but she introduces the poem of personal will and desire, the poem of an individual voice. The great lyric impulses toward reflection, meditation, remembrance, celebration, and heightened sensitivity all emerge in Sappho and become a thread in the master narrative of history, of which literary history and the evolution of language and thought are a part.

The Irish poet Seamus Heaney, in his elegies for his mother, “Clearances,” and for his father, “The Stone Verdict,” examines the vacancy left in the absence of his parents, and considers the many ambiguities of elderly parent/grown child relationships.

Heaney never settles for easy resolutions and rejects doctrinal comforts; critic Jahan Ramazani, in his chapter on Seamus Heaney from *The Poetry of Mourning*, states that Heaney “refuses to redeem death in beautiful poetry” (346), and finds the force of his elegies in that refusal. American poets Jack Gilbert and Mark Doty have written powerful and affecting elegies for a spouse and a life-partner, and A.R. Ammons and Marie Howe have written about the loss of siblings and other family relations. In his poem “By Small and Small: Midnight to Four A.M.,” Jack Gilbert writes of the final hours of his wife Michiko’s life, and recognizes a painful instance in reflection, an opportunity for embrace that he could not see in the moment of grief. I quote the brief poem in its entirety from *Refusing Heaven*:

For eleven years I have regretted it,  
regretted that I did not do what  
I wanted to do as I sat there those  
four hours watching her die. I wanted  
to crawl in among the machinery  
and hold her in my arms, knowing  
the elementary, leftover bit of her  
mind would dimly recognize it was me  
carrying her to where she was going. (14)

The speaker in Gilbert’s poem connects the full weight of his grief to an opportunity he missed, and it is one of key functions of the elegy to locate an abstract sense of loss with a particular moment or image, tracing as far back as Shelley’s evocations of the young Keats in “Adonais,” and perhaps most resembles Thomas Hardy’s elegies for his late wife in *Poems of 1912-13*, such as “At Castle Boterel” and “Her Last Drive.”

Robert Morgan, once called “the Poet Laureate of Appalachia,” writes in his poem “Wild Peavines” of the changing landscapes of the Mountain South, and how those absences represent a lost history. Morgan’s poem opens with the image of how the

Appalachian Mountains must have appeared to the first inhabitants, covered thick with wild peavines and their heavy scent. The speaker struggles to create a picture of this scene, and finally says, “But hardest of all to see/ is how such profusion... could vanish,/ so completely disappear that/ you must look through several valleys/ to find a sprig or strand of wild peavine/ curling on a weedstalk” (126). Once again, M.H. Abrams’ essay “Style and Structure in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” offers a useful analysis for the connections made in the mind of the speaker. Abrams claims that “among Romantic poets, the distinction between self and not-self tends to disappear when confronted with natural landscapes” (98). Abrams’ claim resonates with the conclusion of Morgan’s poem, in which the speaker imagines the near-extinct peavines as representations of his family ancestors, “like some word from a lost language/ once flourishing on every tongue” (126).

A primary concern in the poetry that has most influenced my work is the use of landscape and sense of place in lyric poetry, and specifically the ways in which poets identify strongly with a particular landscape or locale. Literary examples date back to the Greeks, but it is with William Wordsworth and his era of Romantic poets that I begin to trace the line influence and continuity that carries through very contemporary work such as Robert Morgan’s and Charles Wright’s. My second area of concern is deeply intertwined with the first, and deals with the elegy as a mode of lyric writing. Again, the literary tradition of the elegy is essentially as old as literature itself, and I view it as one of the foundational impulses of making art in any form or medium. One of the earliest types of elegy is the “pastoral elegy,” elucidated by Peter Sacks in his indispensable book *The English Elegy*, and many versions of the genre elegize natural objects and animals as

well as human lives. Ecological poets such as Gary Snyder and Robert Bly represent this aspect of the landscape elegy. They are contemporary examples of poets whose ideas about Nature interconnect so deeply with their ideas about human life, that the two are virtually inseparable, and in their work, what is lost in Nature is also lost to humanity.

The mode of the elegy has a long history that far predates English poetry, with roots in Homer, Greek lyric poets and dramatists such as Sappho and Aeschylus, and the eclogues of Theocritus and Virgil. The meanings and associations for the term itself have changed many times through the years. The term *elegy*, or *elegeia*, in Greek referred to a type of meter rather than to a convention of content, such as the lament or mourning poem, as the term has come to represent in the English tradition, though the manner of content—the conscious (and conscientious) mourning over a loss of life, a misplaced belief, an irretrievable time or experience—existed in both Greek and Roman literatures, particularly in the form of epitaphs, as it has in representative literatures of all times and societies. In Old English poetry, one finds elements of the elegiac lament in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, as well as in the touching scene of burial and mourning, as well as justification and consolation, near the end of *Beowulf* after the hero has died. Less pronounced examples exist in Middle English poetry, in the *Pearl* text and in lyrics such as “The Grave,” though not notably in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The elegy then made a powerful re-emergence and a permanent return in the sixteenth century with the work of Edmund Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney, poets who revisited and modified the classical elegiac form. The elegiac impulse is tightly woven into the framework of lyric poetry, but one also finds it the plays of William Shakespeare, as when Hamlet mourns the death of his father, and as the emotional centerpiece of novels from Emily Bronte’s

*Wuthering Heights* (1847) to W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), with such definitive examples as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) between them.

The key elements of elegiac art exist in perfect communion with certain core primal elements of human experience, yet there is no simplicity in the highest forms of elegy, because the experience must make the complicated transferal into art. This constitutes "the work of mourning" Sigmund Freud refers to in the essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," and it is the formalization of human feelings that makes the elegy such a centripetal force in English language poetry. The elegist confronts a seemingly impossible, certainly inevitable task: the event of loss must be articulated and made comprehensible to the audience, regardless of its magnitude or proximity. Every sufferer of loss must absorb or deny the event, must attempt—or not—to work through it, and the elegist must carry this organic process through an artificial gateway, into the realm of the poem itself, the poem in response to the loss. The difficulty facing the poet includes finding the proper register, the adequate image, the correct measure of emotion, a process the Irish poet and Nobel Prize-winner Seamus Heaney, the greatest of contemporary elegists, addresses in his essay "The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac, and the Knocker." Heaney recounts an evening in 1972 in which he and friends have planned to make music together, but as they are set to begin a bomb blasts through Belfast, and the forced considerations he must give to the "embarrassment of the poet because of the artfulness of his art" (Heaney xviii) in the wake of such destruction. The German theorist Theodor Adorno wrestled this issue in his 1949 essay "After Auschwitz," stating that he now believes it is "barbaric" (Adorno 361) to try and "make sense out of the victims'

suffering.” This comment resonates deeply after a century of such prodigious destruction of human life, and such easily-attained, readily-commercialized comfort and diversion. The contemporary poet must resolve this problem—as Heaney does by claiming that within lyric poetry one finds “a sensation of liberation and abundance which is the antithesis of every hampered and deprived condition” (Heaney xviii)—and must take care not to fall into hollow conventions.

## II. Poems and Places: Central Images and Locales

In his now-classic 1986 volume *Unattainable Earth*, Polish Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz includes a prose-meditation on what the poem of the future will contain:

What will the future of poetry be, which I think of but will never know? I know it is attainable because I experienced brief moments when it almost created itself under my pen, only to disappear immediately. The rhythm of the body will be in it, heartbeat, pulse, sweating, menstrual flow, the gluiness of sperm, the squatting position at urinating, the movements of the intestines, together with the sublime needs of the spirit, and our duality will find its form in it, without renouncing one zone or the other. (P 33)

Poems are placed objects. A poet must locate his or her poems. They exist in both the eye and the ear of the reader, yet they also must originate from a source within the poet, and I have tried to bear Milosz’s credo in mind: that the authentic poem must

attend to the body and spirit; the past, the present, and the future; the erotic as well as the contemplative; the ode beside the elegy. The model Milosz proposes belongs not only to the future, but has existed at least since Wordsworth's sublime revelation at the Simplon Pass in *The Prelude*, and Keats's articulation of "Negative Capability" in a letter to his brothers, and continues down through Robert Bly's conception of "two-fold consciousness." The greatest poets of the lyric tradition have recognized and embraced the power of mystery and contradiction, and I have aimed to keep my poems, while ultimately representative and rooted in image, experience, and narrative memory, open to the same power of the unknown.

My *Field Portrait* manuscript begins with "Tennessee Landscape with Blighted Pine," a longer meditative poem that breaks into shorter thematic sections. Many of the recurrent themes in the manuscript appear within this single poem, and the poem covers a great deal of narrative time and geographic space. The poem opens in present tense, with the speaker as a young man standing in a field on his family farm remembering time spent there when he was a boy. The poem moves in sections back through the intervening years and the constancy of that field in his life, and passes through his imagining of how the region must have appeared to his ancestors who settled in the area more than two hundred years before. The poem examines the physical terrain, but also the speaker's personal longings for, and doubts about, a continuity with the land, while looking at contradictions in his own being, and grasping for the ghosts of his lineage that he feels as a tangible presence around him. These same concerns are voiced again in my poems, "Digging the Pond," and "Firing order."

Landscape and particularity of setting is a key to the tradition of Appalachian poetry, but another primary model for this strain of my poetry is the Spanish poet Antonio Machado. Machado imbues such an austerity of vision to the landscapes of his native Castile, which creates not only richly-textured geographic canvases, but also lends a spiritual clarity to his insights. In his 1906 poem “Portrait,” Machado reflects back to his childhood, and how those events shaped him as a poet and prepared for a life of close attention:

I scorn the ballads of loud tenors as hollow  
as a choir of crickets singing to the moon.  
I stop to note the voices from their echo  
and among those voices listen to only one. (ll.17-20)

Machado reminds us that poetry is not only a search for beauty, but also a search for truth, and that spectacle and volume often obscure the kind of truth that close attention can reveal.

Contemporary European poetry also has provided many important models for my poems, and for my thinking about poetry. Tomas Tranströmer’s long poem from 1974, titled *Baltics*, has been an enabling piece of writing for me, in its evocation of family history and personal narrative, and as a way to understand oneself as a thread in an unrecoverable lineage. The poem opens not with a speaker but with an image that is as much temporal as it is spatial:

It was before the age of the radio masts.

Grandfather was a new-made pilot. In the almanac he wrote down the  
vessels he piloted—

names destinations, drafts.

Examples from 1884:

Steam Tiger Capt. Rowan 16 ft Hull Gefle Furusund

Brigg Ocean Capt. Anderson 8 ft Sandofjord Hernosand Furusund

Steamer St Petersburg Capt. Libenburg 11 ft Stettin Libau Sandhamn

These first 7 lines evoke an entire world: a historical moment, an individual in that time, his vocation, the grain of the language he wrote and spoke, as well as an expressive poetic voice and rhythm for the poem. The speaker does not appear until near the end of the second of the poem's six sections, in an extended version of the "out-in-out process" of the "greater Romantic lyric." The poem moves along an associative, imagistic path toward a deep understanding of the speaker's relationship with what came before him. My poem "Tennessee Landscape with Blighted Pine" was definitely influenced by reading *Baltics*, and by the techniques Tranströmer uses to develop the consciousness of a speaker by first introducing the natural setting and family lineage that gave shape to the consciousness.

My evocation of landscape is part of an attempt to access "something more than nature in the grove," as Coleridge says in "Christabel." Nature is both patterned and ever-changing, and provides a perfect model for the workings of poetry—A.R. Ammons has claimed that every poem is like a walk, and no two walks are ever alike, even on the same path at the same time every day. Charles Wright has called landscape interaction the "lever of transcendence," suggesting that it provides the only imagery we have with which to imagine the world beyond our lives. Landscape and elegy have a deep resonance with one another in the history of the lyric poem, as though the content of elegy needed the imagery of pastoral, and that the timelessness of pastoral needed the tone of elegy. I wouldn't necessarily call my poems pastorals, as the pastoral suggests permanence, an unchanging quality, in nature that my experience contradicts. The pastoral does, however, examine the relationship between people and place (both

“landscape,” which is cultivated, and “nature,” which is uncultivated), and that is a key component to my poetry.

I feel particularly connected to the place I grew up in, a small farming community in northeastern Tennessee, about forty miles north of Knoxville, and I’m sure that bond comes through in my work. My experience in this regard is becoming increasingly rare in America, in that I grew up in a community that my ancestors helped to establish in the 1780’s. Johannes Sebastian Graff came to America from the German Palatinate in 1730, and lived in Pennsylvania and then western North Carolina. His daughter married another German immigrant named Henry Scharp, and moved in 1784 to what was then a western outpost, which they named Scharps Fort. Old Johannes and a couple of his sons followed them in a few years to that settlement at the convergence of the Clinch and Powell Rivers, and the younger men took on English sounding names, Sharp and Graves. Johannes died in Sharps Chapel, Tennessee in 1804 at the age of 102, refusing to ever change his name. My family was moved from that particular piece of land—nearly a thousand acres of river-bottom for farming and timber— in the mid- 1930’s when TVA built Norris Dam, so I did not grow up on the same ground they cleared, but only a few miles from it. Much of this history forms the context for “Tennessee Landscape with Blighted Pine,” which tries to understand some of the mystery of feeling that one belongs to a place.

Now I live in Knoxville again, where I spent five years as an undergraduate in the mid-1990s, though previously I lived for four years in Ithaca, New York, and for one year in New Orleans. I was inspired by both of those places. Ithaca is fairly Edenic with its Farmer’s Market, its intellectual diversity, and its abundance of used book stores and

green spaces; New Orleans felt mythic and alive to me in ways that I am trying still to figure out, and yet I never exactly felt at home in either of them. Both of those cities have been settings for a number of my recent poems and will probably continue to be—it's not uncommon for an image or an event to wait several years before presenting itself as a poem to me. However, my understanding of the history and development of Ithaca and New Orleans is so much less ingrained than my sense of the scope of life in east Tennessee, and I think that whatever is most deeply ingrained within a poet is his or her truest subject matter.

My poems rely more heavily on setting, on the physical space in which the poem's action takes place, than most contemporary poetry. Landscape dominates the imagery of my work because I have spent so much time in the midst of it—there are no visible neighbors from the house where I grew up. Had I been raised in Memphis, Tennessee instead of Sharps Chapel, Tennessee, I don't doubt that the settings of my poems would be different, but I suspect that physical surroundings would remain just as important to the imagery. I obsess over place and location in poetry, the grain of specificity and shared history, which draws me naturally to Appalachian writers like Jeff Daniel Marion, Robert Morgan, and Ron Rash, but also gives me access to a poet like Charles Olson, with his own obsession with Gloucester, Massachusetts, that I might not otherwise have—I am skeptical, though, of his whole "Projective Verse" manifesto, which takes the wrong approach to volume and tone in poetry. I do recognize the risk of cliché, the risk of pat-responses in using landscape imagery so heavily, but I think there is also a deeper level of resonance in a solitary speaker in a field that reverberates back

through Theocritus—the impact of the environment on a poet in its midst is present in every culture which has ever produced poetry.

Landscape interactions in poetry provide a means to translate belief, doubt, and relational consciousness—the probing aspects of a speaker’s personality—into tangible imagery. I have written elsewhere about the “natural sublime” in contemporary poetry, particularly in the work of John Ashbery, and I find that it applies to what I am trying to do in my own work. In Ashbery’s poetry, instances of the natural sublime occur in less monumental forms than in the work of British Romantic poets, for whom the vastness of the Alps offered the definitive image of Nature’s sublimity, its dominance over human life, and also, as in the case of Wordsworth’s “Simplon Pass” episode from *The Prelude*, the surprise by which it can overwhelm the human mind. Perhaps the most illustrative example of the effect of Romantic version of the natural sublime appears in Shelley’s “Mont Blanc,” with lines that read, “Dizzy ravine! and when I gaze on thee/ I seem as in a trance sublime and strange....” Shelley goes on in the passage to situate his speaker’s mind as passively attuned to his surroundings, yet overwhelmed by “one legion of wild thoughts” brought on by the magnitude of the landscape. In Ashbery’s work, however, magnitude is no longer required from natural settings to produce sublime effects. In fact, no aspect of living requires magnitude to achieve the sublime, The gleam of surfaces holds great appeal for Ashbery, and just as he moves freely between tonal registers and levels of diction, he also slips from the sublime into the beautiful, or lingers in the midpoint of the picturesque, with seamless facility. Landscape is just as open for figurative use as literal use, the same as any other image, and can represent a relation with a larger symbolic structure, or merely stand as the picture of its own physical

presence. If images of the natural world are not open for experimental interpretation, for being seen and felt in new ways, then they no longer sustain the weight of depiction.

Edmund Burke provides the first important Romantic-era reading of sublimity in his 1757 study *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, a text that shows the disparity between the effects of beauty and its darker, more compelling counterpart, the sublime. For Burke, beautiful objects are small, smooth, delicate, ornate, submissive, and light in tone and color, whereas the sublime embodies darkness, vastness, and magnificence, approaches infinity, and most importantly, produces terror. The natural world, of course, demonstrates all of these qualities, spanning the full range of beauty and sublimity, and many of its features, rivers and mountains (to borrow the title of Ashbery's third volume of poetry) for instance, only yield to categorization when placed in a defining context, unlike, say, chrysanthemums, which can be either beautiful or not, depending on the taste of the observer, but never sublime. In her book, *Solitude and the Sublime*, Frances Ferguson sheds an interesting light on the individuality produced in objects once they are given their defining context, and implicitly points to a crucial difference between the Romantic sublime and the postmodern sublime:

Nature, working on a vast scale, is adept at the striking particulars that design singles out, but no good at all on composition if we understand that process as one of organizing particulars within harmonious relationships. Composition, then, involves supplying a middle distance. And if the sublime aesthetic continually produces scenes in

which the limitations of individual perception become tributes to the ability of human reason to think past those very perceptions, Gilpin's picturesque uses composition as a more routine way of insisting upon the centrality of the individual viewer. Mediating between nature's vastness and the particulars of nature's design, the picturesque traveler searches for composable scenes. (138)

My poem "Nightjar Songs," like much of the writing in *Field Portrait*, considers the vastness of the unknowable, particularly in light of how little we can apprehend with certainty even of the close-at-hand. The poem gains access to its subject matter through physical description, searching unsuccessfully for what Ferguson calls "the composable scene." The speaker of the poem reflects his own internal disorder against the comparative order the external, and can almost, though not quite, accept that both are part of some larger "design." The poem takes part in the changing nature of the sublime, namely that in the contemporary world the monumental may be felt in even so contained a landscape as a front yard. I hope that both the word and concept of "design" echoes the contemporary debate surrounding the "intelligent design" of the universe by some force greater than cosmic accident, about which the speaker remains skeptical, as well as the literary precedent of Robert Frost's classic poem "Design," and its ambivalent view on divine intervention and governance.

Much contemporary American poetry, in a gesture of response to an increasingly technological way of life, sacrifices depth of attention and locality of focus for an aesthetics of rapid dislocation and emotional detachment. Young American poets like

Matthea Harvey and Joshua Clover write poems that respond with frenetic juxtapositions of scene and image, and which constantly undercut any gesture toward emotional investment or attachment. In a prominent essay titled, “Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment,” published in the March 2006 issue of *Poetry* magazine, Tony Hoagland diagnoses the situation:

Generally speaking, this time could be characterized as one of great invention and playfulness. Simultaneously, it is also a moment of great aesthetic self-consciousness and emotional removal. Systematic development is out; obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity are in. Especially among young poets, there is a widespread mistrust of narrative forms and, in fact, a pervasive sense of the inadequacy or exhaustion of all modes other than the associative. Under the label of “narrative,” all kinds of poetry currently get lumped misleadingly together: not just story but discursion, argument, even descriptive lyrics.

They might better be called the “Poetries of Continuity.”

Many contemporary poems move from image to image with video game-like intensity without presenting any point of authority or consequence, often with no discernible speaker. Whereas Hoagland finds the essential “skittery”-ness of contemporary poetry located in its dissociative tendencies, I find the problem of emotional removal exists in direct correspondence to the author’s glibness about the subject matter of the poem. Hoagland rightly indicates that Matthea Harvey’s has written “a poem, we are never

allowed to forget, about pronouns.” In other words, nothing is at stake in the poem, except the chance that the humor may fall flat. Harvey’s poem doesn’t risk anything emotionally, and in fact, doesn’t even present a speaker. Such poetry is a continuation of the assault on the “Lyric I” initiated by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry throughout the 1980s. I agree entirely with Hoagland’s conclusion that this approach to poetry, in an attempt to pay homage to life in an elliptical cultural moment, risks a commitment to being ultimately about nothing, an inadvertent homage to triviality.

In his book *Memory and Enthusiasm*, W.S. Di Piero, in a discussion of Keats and the Italian Nobel Laureate Eugenio Montale, writes:

A major lyric poet is one who not only explores in a sustained way, but who also tries to determine and *place*, the graduated registers of actual and metaphysical reality, and who is willing to assert the precise relations between the worlds of the living and of the dead, the relations between the here-and-now and the *aldila*. (176)

Many of the current trends and fashions of contemporary poetry suggest potential for the birth of another age of satire. After a decade of political absurdity and ineptitude, a near constant threat of economic collapse, it is not hard to see how a turn toward satire could happen. The history of Latin and English poetry would seem to indicate such a move toward the satirical as a natural development following an age of great, sustained lyric output, though that dialectic must be resisted if American poetry is to avoid a similar dead-end. I feel that contemporary poetry is strongest when it averts the postmodern impulse toward dislocation and detachment. The contrast between the “skittery poem of

our moment” and the poems of our finest writers of the personal lyric, such as Jack Gilbert, Louise Gluck, and B.H. Fairchild, who make the explorations into the actual and the metaphysical that Di Piero elucidates, only exemplifies the strength of a poetics of continuity and the permanence of lyric poetry.

### III. Dynamic Alertness: Forms and Measures

In his essay, “Improvisations on Form and Measure,” poet Charles Wright states, “In poems, all considerations are considerations of form” (3). I believe that I have always recognized this deep in the back stretches of my mind, but I had never quite brought it to bear regarding my own poems, had never articulated it in practice before taking on the challenge of working in forms. My mature thinking on poetry was shaped early and irreversibly by William Wordsworth’s claim in his “Preface Attached to *Lyrical Ballads*, to write with “language really used by men.” This led me to conclude that the most natural voice, and the most natural forms, would be the only acceptable route for my poems, and that the most natural form would be, of course, free verse. All of the contemporary poets I admired, such as James Wright, Robert Bly, Gary Snyder, and Mary Oliver wrote in the language of everyday speech, and they had rejected the formal constraints of earlier generations. I am tempted to say that I accepted free verse as the water in which I would swim, and never thought twice about it, but in looking back I do remember working as an undergraduate at forms, even winning the poetry prize for formal poems with a pantoum I had written outside of class. I suppose questions of form have been with me since the beginning of my serious work at poetry, along with an

interest in determining whether formal verse could accomplish anything that free verse could not. In attempt after attempt at this in my recent work, I found that in holding a poem to form, something happened each time that surprised me, as in the case of “Vista,” with the line about Cezanne, or the form that emerged in “Earthly Turning,” in order to emphasize its two-stress half-lines. Some of the surprises contribute more to the poems than others, and some poems responded better to being held in form, but ultimately I feel that my range as a poet has broadened considerably during the course of this concentrated examination of poetic forms.

Even when I do not use particular measures or patterns in the architecture of my poems, I am very conscious of the music a phrase or an image must make in order to lift the language into the realm of poetry. I pay close attention to syllable counts and line lengths in my free verse poems as much as in my formal poems; for instance, in my poem “Mother’s Milk,” the voice of the speaker changes in tonality, moving from a documentary-style cataloguing to conversational address to the fragmentary mode of internal dialogue, yet the six distinct sections of the poem maintain a shapeliness, a consistency of design, that balances the movements in the voice. In other poems, such as “House Seat,” also a poem inspired by time spent with my mother, I write in a strict syllabic pattern, alternating 10-syllable and 7-syllable line counts. The use of a regular syllabic count creates a feeling of directed forward movement, but without the sense of lock-step marching that a pattern of set stresses can force upon a poem.

*Field Portrait* includes poems about my mother, my wife, and my daughter, three of the keys to my life and the meaning it has taken on over the years; poems for my father and my late uncle, whose work ethics and personal kindnesses were two of my earliest

inspirations for poetry; a handful of poems that address, directly and indirectly, my frustration with the current state of American politics, particularly its encouragement of vacant consumerism and religious fundamentalism; an ongoing fascination with a mode of poetry that M.H. Abrams has called “landscape autobiography” and the rooted-ness created by generations of one family settled in a single place; and several poems in which memory and bodies of water converge to form a counter-balance to my continued examination of the imagery of open fields and forests. The poems in the dissertation manuscript also represent an effort to employ a variety of available sources of materials as well as a broad range of stylistic and tonal possibilities, and several of the poems admit an undercurrent of humor or irony, an important part of my personal sensibility that did not develop in my writing for many years. Poems such as “Sparrow,” “Man Cursing the Night,” and “Elegy for the Hay Rake,” gesture toward a wry understanding that poetry should not collapse under its own weight. The variation in appearance could give a reader the sense of a poet floundering for a form, or for a personal style, but each of the poems in *Field Portrait* has been carefully weighed and measured against the other poems in the collection with a definite attention to coherence and sustained statement. The content of each poem determined its own form— some calling for rigorous constraints and some calling for none at all— and I believe that my openness to form granted the poems the freedom they needed to emerge.

Certain individual poems bear the mark of the poets I was reading at the time I wrote them. “River Gods” was inspired by Yusef Komunyakaa’s poem “Confluence” from his collection *Thieves of Paradise*, especially in its evocation of the mythos linking water and memory, and layering of time and experience through the image of a bridge.

Komunyakaa's lines, "...So deep in the lore,/there's only tomorrow where darkness/splinters & wounds the bird of paradise," resonated with my sense of how a space that had shaped my consciousness also had a history, some factual and some mythic, that shaped my history as well. My return to Knoxville, Tennessee, as a doctoral student has brought me back into contact with people and places that I knew intimately for the first twenty-five years of my life, and particularly the formative years of my young adulthood. In this poem, and a number of others, I confront feelings that seem planted in the place, as natural and present as shadows, but which really belong to an earlier time, and to an earlier version of my self. The form for "River Gods" emerged from my reading of Komunyakaa, but also out of a sense of organic and intuitive shape for the content of the poem. I chose a tercet line rather than Komunyakaa's couplet because my poem lingered with certain images and scenes of action longer, and relies more on the establishment of a narrative movement through time, though I do think they develop in a similar, particularly in the way their conclusions leave a sense of unresolved mystery behind human actions and desires.

Robert Hass's poems in *Human Wishes* and *Sun Under Wood* were models for my poems "Mother's Milk" and "His Confession," both of which experiment with shape and movement, and also with a tonal looseness that moves from the weighty to the wry and back again. I have also considered Hass's use of the prose poem, as well as his hybrid form of long-lined lyric poems that embody the attention to image and a kind of spatial rhythm, yet retain some of the expansiveness of a prose line. In the sequence of poems that opens Hass's volume *Human Wishes*, including "Spring Drawing," "Spring Rain," "Late Spring," and "Spring Drawing 2," the hybrid line creates a texture distinct from

verse lines and from prose, and embody the value placed on imagery and rhythm, which Hass emphasizes in his seminal collection of essays, titled *Twentieth Century Pleasures*. My poems “Storm Lines” and “Echolalia” show the importance of Brenda Hillman’s idea of putting “air” into the lines of poems and giving a voice to the silence and white space inherent in every poem. Her collections *Cascadia* and *Loose Sugar* exemplify how a concern with natural elements and cycles suggests a model for poetics. “Storm Lines” particularly owes a debt to Hillman, as it gave me the opportunity to weight each line by its rhythm rather than using conventional punctuation, and to articulate gestures in less familiar or comfortable phrasings. Reading the manuscript as a whole, however, I believe that the poems cohere under a single voice, a single vision for how the world operates, and that the more experimental poems do not represent a break from my style or manner, but rather a promising sign of enlargement, forerunners of a more expansive poetic accomplishment.

As with many things, Walt Whitman has written as movingly as any poet about the embodiment of form in the 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass*, in Section 27, just after he has urged his unseen listener to embrace the “puzzle of puzzles,/ And that we call Being:”

[27]

To be in any form, what is that?  
If nothing lay more developed the quahuag and its callous  
shell were enough.

Mine is no callous shell,  
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or  
stop,  
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,  
To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as  
I can stand.

This is Whitman's vision of form as it exists organically within the human body, exactly where Robert Pinsky believes the voice of poetry originates (Pinsky locates the initial stirrings of a poem in the thorax). The poet William Matthews once famously wrote, "I am in my poems because I am in my life." I have tried to write my poems from a coherent perspective, communicating my perceptions of the people, places, and ideas that I encounter through imaginative renderings and explorations. This is not the same thing as keeping a journal, in part because it is intended for an audience of readers, and also because I have given the experiences form. It is not relevant whether the material is autobiographical or not, but only whether the evocations are truthful to human experience and understanding. I am increasingly convinced that a personal speaker, with an implied or addressed listener, is the essence of the lyric poem.

As a child, I was something of a collector, of baseball cards, Hot Wheels cars, little things like that, but also a collector of information: I would learn things like the habitat, hunting methods, and war decorations for every Native American tribe; I could identify cars from a certain period just by seeing the position of the headlights or the shape of a fender; I memorized batting averages and earned run averages for every Major League baseball team. I think this tendency in my mind plays out in a pronounced way in some of my strongest poetry, the collection and reconfiguration of details, of "time and materials," to borrow a concept from Robert Hass. My poems "At Seven" and "Equations" both register these propensities. I feel that I am working now on a canvas

that is both broader and somehow deeper in perspective than I have been able to access before, and that energy shows up for me in the language I find available to the poems. One of the primary distinctions between poetry and prose is the dividing of material into lines and stanzas. Poetry is an art of juxtaposition, and a poet's approach to arranging the content becomes one of the ways he or she develops a stylistic signature. I felt at one point too reliant upon a structure of 20-24 lines, usually in three stanzas that followed a pattern of conflict development and resolution, and in the pair of poems mentioned above, and many other recent poems, I have felt capable of both the concision of a short poem, and the expanse of a long poem.

One of the centerpiece works in *Field Portrait* is a sequence of three related sonnets, under the title "Firing Order," that examines the rural life my family in upper East Tennessee has led for several generations and the cultural changes which have affected that way of being. The idea for this poem dates back at least a dozen years, as do a couple of other poems in the manuscript, though the final version that appears here retains nothing of the first draft written then except for the central image of my father and I in a field working on a old truck. No other phrases or images from that short free-verse poem contributed to this sonnet sequence, but that particular image held in my imagination for many years until I found the form that best accommodated it.

In a 1982 essay titled "The Origin of the Sonnet," Paul Oppenheimer proposes that modern poetry begins when the sonnet form was discovered by the Italian poet of the early thirteenth century named Giacomo da Lentino. The sonnet form introduces a new potential for the lyric poem, an inward-searching poem not meant for public performance but intended a private (or non-existent) audience. Oppenheimer writes:

Giacomo's earliest sonnets themselves provide the strongest clues to the possibility that in writing them the poet was deliberately turning away from the kinds of songs made and sung by the troubadours and creating a new type of lyric with new, modern, and "silent" intentions. (297)

Oppenheimer believes that the importance of this development can hardly be overstated, as it forms for him the birth of the modern mind, an advance in the direction of meditation and self-reflection. It is, at the very least, a crucial step in the movement from Greek lyric to the English Renaissance and Shakespeare, and from there on toward the "greater Romantic lyric," which ultimately leads to the most consequential contemporary literature.

I find it interesting that several poets from Southern Appalachia have employed normative formal designs in their poems, and I would like to consider the possible reasoning for it in the work of two particular poets. Among the several aesthetic reasons that two poets as remarkably gifted as Robert Morgan and Ron Rash would move toward formal structures, two motives emerge most convincingly. First, both poets are invested in creating a sense of the living past, what Morgan has called "a community across time." Part of the living past of poetry is structural and aural regularity, the continuity of sound patterns and visual recognitions, thus creating a bond and an agreement between the poet and the reader. In their recent work, Morgan and Rash fill the worlds of their poems with voices of long distant ancestors, memories of departed family members, and stories and myths from their home communities. Like so many Appalachian poets, Morgan and Rash strive to evoke the sense of a continuous merging of past and present within worldly

experience, while also establishing a note of particularity, a unique perspective through the pitch of their own poetic voices. This relates to the second compelling reason for a shift to more regular forms, which is to take a stance against prevailing cultural trends. American poetry since the 1960's has witnessed the rise of Beat poetry; the New York School and its stars, Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery; the Black Arts Movement; the Black Mountain School; "Disembodied Poetics;" L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry; and the contemporary elliptical movement that Tony Hoagland referred to as "the skittery poem of our moment." Each of these movements takes a radical position in regard to verse form, all in favor of open forms, and all seemingly in competition to find the least historically-derived version.

In lyric poetry, a mastery of forms is secondary to the resonance of content, and it is notable that both Morgan and Rash also write poems without syllable patterns, in standard free verse, and in other, often more complicated verse forms. In one of his signature poems, "Honey," from the 2000 collection *Topsoil Road*, Robert Morgan revisits the image of the lattice (which he used earlier in his prose piece *Mica: Reflective Bits from a Notebook*) as a term of design, in this case to describe the hives of honey bees,

a sealed relic of sun and time  
and roots of many acres fixed  
in crystal-tight arrays, in rows  
and lattices of sweeter latin  
from scattered prose of meadow, woods. (ll. 21-25)

The first definition of "lattice" in *The American Heritage Dictionary* reflects the most familiar building-trade terminology, "An open framework made of strips of metal, wood, or similar material interwoven to form regular, patterned spaces." This is fitting as an

image for the effect of writing syllabic lines, but there is also a third dictionary entry that applies to physics (a field Morgan has studied carefully and whose language he has brought to his poetry), “A regular, periodic configuration of points, particles, or objects throughout an area of space, especially the arrangement of ions or molecules in a crystalline solid.” This breaking down of the line into its smallest particles deepens the metaphor of poetry as lattice work, without losing the freedom of the “open framework” so necessary to the poetics of Morgan and Rash. The pitfalls of working exclusively with a single syllabic count include the risk of sameness and pre-determination, of limiting experience to representation on an artificially limited canvas, so Morgan and Rash create frameworks for their poems with many different materials and textures.

In a technological society, ways of doing things change rapidly—new means replace old means—but in Appalachia, entire ways of life have changed in three generations. This is not to say that Appalachia was ever a non-technological society, but simply that in this region the means and the ends of survival were often indistinguishable, that a life on the land is synchronous with a livelihood drawn from the land. In urban settings, people commute to work rather than walk, they cook on a gas or electric stove rather than coal, they work on a laptop rather than a typewriter; in these instances, the means change, but ends remain the same. I believe that my work represents a generation of Appalachian writers who are witnessing the shift first-hand, so I record not only the work and ways of the living present; I also record the change itself, and the attendant losses. One could call this work commemorative, and as memory is mother of the muses, that would be an accurate claim, but in another sense, my real goal is to give this vanishing history a second life. I mean to take Eliot’s claim about “the historical sense”

seriously, and by embracing certain aspects of poetry's long tradition, such as syllabic verse forms and the sonnet-sequence, I hope to invoke the past as a deeper layer, a substrata, of life in the continuously evolving present moment.

I have given a good deal of consideration to the ways in which one art form can interact with another. Several of the poems in *Field Portrait* attempt to recreate episodes in which playing or listening to music influences the scene or action, as in “Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake,” “A Short Life of Trouble,” (both take their titles from old folk-country ballads), and “Faubourg Marigny.” The poem “Hill Stomp” attempts to recreate lyrics from Mississippi blues musician Robert Belfour, using the rhythms and vernacular phrasing of his music. The poem “Elemental Study” examines the way music and painting come together, as both try to articulate some internal struggle or passion, much the way poetry does. I have paid particular attention recently to how such often-contrasted mediums such as poetry and painting might intersect. Ekphrastic poetry dates for back into the origins of poetry and exists in practically every age from the Greek lyric and Renaissance pastoral to the New York School poets of the 1950s, and is defined by James Heffernan simply as “the verbal representation of graphic representation.” Ekphrasis in poetry provides both a means of interpretation and stockpile of images, through which the poet may examine an occurrence unrelated to the image in the visual artwork metaphorically, thus creating two levels of association for the poem's imagery.

Vincent Van Gogh's painting *The Night Café* struck me unexpectedly as I was scanning through the book *How to Read a Modern Painting*, looking for a different print—Arnold Böcklin's symbolist piece *Isle of the Dead*. The intensity of the image in *The Night Café*, a room depicted in low but stringent light, swirling and various shades of

red and green, commanded my attention, and then the particulars of the scene began to evoke a vague familiarity, a sense of my own memories of such rooms. The larger idea occurred to me of how many hours I had spent in bars talking with friends, listening to music, and experiencing the full impact of their physical spaces, and I thought of the consequence those times. Mostly, those moments were inconsequential, yet that as well seemed significant. This line of thinking triggered a particular memory, of time spent with a friend during the year I lived in New Orleans, and what our conversations had really been about, what they were really hoping to accomplish, and I began the poem, “The Night Café, North Rendon, New Orleans.” This particular poem appears just over a quarter of the way through *Field Portrait*, and employs the same long-line, unrhymed couplet structure as the earlier poems, “Understory,” and “Reading Late.” I have generally used this structure to help balance episodes or sequences of the content which occur at more than one time in the past, though by no means in every poem in which that happens. This scene emerged over all the other instances in bars or restaurants that came to mind, I think because of what the speaker believes the two men are trying to accomplish, the preservation of their life experiences, in the exchange. The tone is wry at first, but darkens as the conversation goes beyond shared musical interests and into the realm of personal failures, reflecting the mood of the painting, but also the tendency for more private subject matter to arise after a conversation between friends continues. I believe this idea resonates with other poems based on significant moments within friendships, such “River Gods,” which precedes it in the book, “His Confession,” and “Elemental Study.”

I have not divided the poems in my *Field Portrait* manuscript into sections based on formal tendencies, but rather have tried to let resonances between individual poems determine the arrangement. For instance, a poem in received form, such as the pantoum “For the Frozen Wood,” which closes the manuscript, carries within echoes of both theme and sentiment from the more experimental dropped-line form of “Tennessee Landscape with Blighted Pine,” which opens the collection. Those poems benefit from being placed as bookends in the manuscript, and they have the opportunity to echo formal varieties and content-based similarities both forward and backward throughout the body of work. Most of the poems in *Field Portrait* are written in open forms, and it is my hope that the significant number of poems written in traditional form benefit from the juxtaposition, as every line in the entire manuscript has been weighed and measured regardless of the type of poem in which it appears.

I hope that the critical introduction and the original poems in *Field Portrait* examine and exemplify not only theoretical concerns in modern and contemporary poetry, but also the craft of shaping poems, and the technique that brings them into being in the first place. The Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney writes about the difference between craft and technique in his essay “Feeling into Words,” collected in his book *Preoccupations*, calling craft “the skill of making,” but going much further with what technique means to a poet:

Technique, as I would define it, involves not only a poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm, and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance toward life, a definition of his own reality. It involves the

discovery of ways to go beyond his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art. (47)

A poet must recognize truth and substance in his own voice, but I have been lucky to maintain a group of close and trusted readers, whether in a university workshop, an informal set of friends, or a committee of professors working at the highest levels in the discipline, who have provided a second field of vision, another collection of eyes capable of recognizing inclinations, directions, influences, and wrong turnings in my work. The work in *Field Portrait* represents my efforts to “raid the inarticulate,” to use Heaney’s echo of T.S. Eliot’s “East Coker,” and make poems out of the raw materials I have found there.

*I*

## Tennessee Landscape with Blighted Pine

Dry summer and the upper field quiet at noon.  
Spring's green pirouette tangled in barbed wire,  
Its promise snapped like matchsticks, burnt-orange  
Pine needles cracking loose from stiff joints,  
Silence dropped so low  
It rings like a bell's soft echo.

Here once was a boy running with a black and white half shepherd dog,  
Hair summer-blonde, hands darkened to rust by wet clay  
Rummaged for arrowheads.

No fear then but the darting tongues of timber snakes:

That certainty lost to whatever passes for time,  
The ground skipped beneath his feet.

\* \* \*

Once I stood here through a mid-day snowfall, sky staring and nearly dark,  
Watching my shoes sink in the white sheets,  
Petals of frozen clouds feathering down through my eyelashes.  
Home from college, free of abnormal psychology  
And media arts, endless boredoms that passed for a life of the mind.

Not a sound that whole afternoon, nothing more alive than my breath,  
Silence in the snowy field, the heavy trees,  
Known in sense but not by name, nothing really known by name.

\* \* \*

No one come here to build the perfect city.  
They came out of Philadelphia and before that New York,  
Before that Baden-Baden and the Palatinate.

A narrow river unspooled out of the mountains, Alamance County,  
Western Carolina, and washed them up  
Before what must have seemed God's own promise:

Tall fescue and cleft hoofprints of deer on the muddy banks.

Here they could harvest what grew, tear life out of the ground.

They started with trees, built a lumber-mill and floated log-rafts downriver  
To settlements in Rockwood, Oliver Springs, and Chattanooga—

1792.

Already the name had been lightened to Graves, and only old Johannes,  
Born 1703 in the Rhineland, still kept himself Graff.

\* \* \*

Left alone, indoors, I tend toward sounds not found  
In the open field, *Sotto voce* of Mahler's *Misterioso Symphony*,  
Surge and retreat of John Coltrane's *Crescent*.

No analogue in nature, no precedent in the high branches.

One night in Faubourg Marigny I heard Kidd Jordan ignite the air  
With a tenor saxophone.

It sounded like ashes falling, each speck a thousand pounds.

\* \* \*

Life abounds on the perimeter, overflushes the fencerows  
Most years, honeysuckle lacing the cedar posts,  
But now the heat beats its odd rhythms and the billion tiny teeth  
Of the blight work through this zone and the next,  
Leaving orange skeletons standing over variegated shadows.

Chestnuts once shouldered this ridgeline, owned the horizons  
From Sharps Chapel to Jellico Mountain, on past the blue smudge  
Of Clinch Mountain to the east.

Impossible to picture it today, three generations after aphids cut through them—  
Floorboards and ceiling joists, finely-grained paneling  
In the old houses the only proof that an existence once so sturdy could vanish  
Like clouds into clouds.

\* \* \*

So many years ago a man toiled here, clearing and reaping the barest life.

How many years?

The years themselves do not know, do not count turns

In their circle.

Before Lincoln, before Darwin, before Marx.

One of his sons killed in the field by an Indian.

An X by "His Mark" on the deed. An X by "His Wife's Mark."

The words Jesse Graves quilled below it in the practiced hand of a magistrate.

\* \* \*

The dead move through us at their will, their voices chime just beyond our hearing.

How else do we feel our names when no one speaks them?

How else catch the echo of footprints two decades after running through the grass?

Alone in the field, and never alone. Quiet and not quiet.

Home and away.

## At Seven

Every morning, morning's measure: breakfast early, then play,  
Flashing across the porch with cats or soldiers' planes,  
Their metal wings armed with tiny machine guns  
And stamped with a Union Jack or the Stars and Bars.

The side yard stretched into the beaches at Normandy  
Or else Fenway Park, baseball cards taking the field,  
Pennant races played out with nickels and a wooden pencil.

The pre-structure of summer days, as before the terrible  
Arrival of chalkboards, homework, and long stillness,  
Table and chair and child all bolted together.

What work there was involved the grass and a loud  
Engine, its fumes turning circles in the nose and behind  
The eyes, or an open pocketknife through strands of twine,  
Straw-bales loosened and scattered over the seedling beds.

## Firing Order

### I

We found no warmth under the open hood,  
Stranded mid-field where the truck's engine failed.  
This work precedes all other, hay baled,  
Stacked high and waiting on the metal bed.  
Cows in winter, like broken furniture leaned  
Against a wall, braced in zippery wind,  
Staring out from their mysterious minds,  
Hipbones like arched frames carved from wood.

My job was simple: I held the wrench  
While his fingers set to work pulling wires,  
Clearing rust and debris from the engine  
Block, pocket knife flashing quick and sure.  
His hands in the open heart of a machine,  
Old plugs scraped clean enough to carry fire.

### II

The field reveals no human history,  
Logs none of the hours my father spent  
Disking its soil, sowing down seeds, back bent  
Like a tire iron, his fair neck blistered.  
Bitt Rouse's sleeve once caught in the corn thresh  
Keeps us careful, mindful of accidents—  
Blood spilled here seeps through webs of buried roots.  
Subsoil remembers, but topsoil forgets:

Forty summers ago, high heat of June  
Salting the air, a young man's good right hand,  
The one that bowed his famous fiddle tunes,  
Churned to paste well before the pain began,  
His feet tearing marks like ancient runes  
Etched in the dirt, his signature on that land.

### III

Under the pond's frozen face bright florets  
Of algae swirl out and spread through the wild  
Energy of their iced-over lives,  
Deeper cold approaching with sunset.  
Late November drawing down, so much less  
Than it started with, early cold, crops shriveled,  
The leaves tell it all in colorful wreckage.  
He remembers, and I do, but the ground forgets.

What work gets done today will come again  
Tomorrow, the day after, on and on,  
Until he gives out, and the ground reclaims  
What my father and I set in motion,  
An engine turning, our family name  
Stamped on the place that takes us back in.

## Understory

Cold morning, upstate premiere of May, two dogs  
chasing down the slope toward the water.

Sky and lake, mist over mistfall's shadow,  
all color lapsed into countless gray strands,

one shade dark as a finely cased bullet,  
the next faded as slide locks on windows

of the chained-up Ithaca Gun Factory.  
I've stood beside Cayuga Lake on the rocks

watching wind steer circles on the surface,  
crest and wave, the opposite bank a thumb-print.

Two young dogs at play in a field, not here,  
but in the meadow behind my great-uncle Joe's

fallen barn, a morning twenty years past,  
lodged between the eye and memory's socket.

\* \* \*

A golden age, a blue-eyed shepherd and a mutt  
running beside a boy, seen by no one then,

by no one now, except a grown man looking  
across a lake eight hundred miles from that field.

A rabbit bolts from the fencerow and the dogs  
take off. There he stands, his hands on a rail

split by some great-great-grandfather long ago,  
a name nearly lost and a face he cannot picture,

never photographed, never made part of the record.

\* \* \*

A glacial shift gouged them out of flat lands,  
eleven long scars filled as deep as Lake Ontario,

gifts of the ice age, splintered bones, Finger Lakes,  
fished by the Iroquois who tended their banks.

This year's ice age held until early spring,  
yet leaves struggle forth on the oaks and maples

to tremble in the wind, a cold surge I can feel  
through sub-layers of my skin, follicles of my hair.

Nothing aches like home, and how the slow hours  
traveled to get here from there turn into years,

the full weight of stone between my native foothills,  
understory of the oldest mountains on earth,

and the northern broadening out of Appalachia,  
time flattening toward the absence of it all.

\* \* \*

Not here. Not on the rocky bank of Cayuga Lake,  
shaken loose by a steady throb of the jet stream.

Not by the ruins of an ancient barn, one dog rolled  
under a car, the other shot by a prick on a motorbike.

Not even in the library, between thumb-weathered  
board-backings that hold secrets written to water,

diary of a week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers,  
elegy for a lost brother, a vision of time suspended,

words that do not answer the question I cannot form:  
some mix of whereness and now, thisness and then,

never wherever I am, and not part of the record.

## Temper in a Time of War

In and out of conversation all day, mind drifting against the present,  
Into my fist slamming against the dining room table this morning,  
Enraged at your willfulness, your spite, lack of order.  
Instead of repeating the whole fight, I see just one scene,  
Envisioning only the moment when you withered  
In shock at my voice spinning sideways toward you.

To be eight years old through the twilight of a great country,  
Torn out of your trust by one you are supposed to trust--  
Towering over you, that's how I felt at the table.  
Together but scattered into as many particles as the humming air.

I notice how you listen to the world, asking me what  
Insurgents means. Your ear tuned to a tragedy we didn't create,  
Intuition telling you it's worse than I would have you believe.  
In and out of conversation, my mind drifting always back to you.

## Johnson's Ground

We sit under the awning and watch them descend in unison.  
A flock of thirty or more down through the heavy rain  
We weren't supposed to get, pecking where grass is thin  
For what the moisture turns up.

They look like the sound of the word  
Grackle, these scavengers with wings muted black as painted iron rails,  
As wet tar, their empty beaks flashing a bright citrus smear.  
Memorial Day weekend and the weather drives us for cover,  
Beating down plastic flowers and darkening the family gravestones.

Each year we arrive, like any family, to admire new babies  
And find out who has changed jobs or gotten married,  
I come to see who's left to sit in the shaded chairs  
Where my grandmother sat with her oldest sister Minnie  
For the last time, neither of them able to name the other,  
But both staring as if into a clouded mirror.

In the memory of their faces  
I see pillars of stone, pillars of stippled salt,  
Where the hammer of time drives the chisel of living,  
The opaque blue of their eyes, each pair reflecting the other,  
Sky blue buttons threaded through a dark blue dress.

Homecoming at the cemetery: they never let us go, even the ones  
Laid under before our births continue to make their claims,  
To draw the interest on their spent lives.

My grandfather waits here,  
A Houston buried in Johnson ground—such is the appointment  
He made with them. He was dead two years before  
I was born, but who do I remind the old people of?  
Whose picture did I stare into above the living room fireplace?

My great-uncle Gene tells my father and me about the base  
He served in Korea, how bombs sounded hitting the village,  
While a hundred feet away is my cousin Gary,  
killed in Vietnam, telling his story into our other ears,  
into the soles of our shoes.

The foraging birds drag worms  
Out of the ground; we pull dark meat from the bones  
Of chicken thighs and split boiled potatoes with plastic forks.

Damp air hums in our lungs and old people begin  
Covering dishes—the rain always seeps in,  
Even under shelter.

I offer my hands one more time,  
To the company who packs their leftovers and drives away,  
And to the company who stays behind, under the tall grass,  
Left in the restless turning of what we remember of them.

Late Summer Woodcut

*Man is in love, and loves what vanishes.*

*What more is there to say?*

*William Butler Yeats*

We waited until nearly sunset before  
picking up our knives and heading out.  
I watched my uncle's fingers  
through the late brink of light  
working over the rough cedar stick  
with a black-handled Barlow,  
the blade no wider than his thumb.  
Purple shavings curled away toward  
the grass and into the folds of his jacket.  
Their scent reminded me of a toy chest  
filled with metal airplanes, each one  
marked with an allied flag on its wing.

He showed me the test of a knife,  
razing hair along the back of his hand.  
Each of us knew the practical truth,  
what happens when it gets in your lungs,  
how the menace multiplies and eats through.  
We needed a long talk about the disease,  
chemistry and radiation, what to hope against,  
before the cool September night drove us inside.  
Starlings flocked to the trees behind us,  
their wings beating heavily as a thunderstorm,  
I took their whistles and clicks for song,  
listening for a message, some secret release.

Our breath fogged the air and to see it  
come to life, a presence right before us,  
amplified the settling darkness—  
this is all there is, all we are: without it, nothing.  
A smooth circle suddenly took shape  
at the stick's slender end and each flick  
of his knife revealed a deeper stroke of color,  
the heart of the wood emerging.

## Reading Late

When we walked between the ponds at the World's Fair park  
the first night we knew something definite had hold of us,

conversations reaching not much beyond favorite bands,  
least favorite jobs. We had not held hands.

Nothing existed of our daughter, not yet a nameless dream,  
or the years we chased snakes out of the baseboards

in the house by Sapsucker Woods, driving home late  
to find deer on their hind legs foraging our bird-feeders.

This book we write together keeps me turning pages  
Deep into the night, re-reading the chapters on eloping

to Charlottesville, eating boiled crawfish at Mardi Gras.  
Tension rises through pages about debt, doubt, deceit,

as the main characters grow steadily beyond our grasp,  
suspended from the hidden strings of this love story

that opens in such a beautiful setting, develops with so much  
indirection and suspense, I can't stand to put it down.

## The Upper Ridge

How it is Night—in Nest and Kennel—  
And where was the Wood—  
Just a dome of Abyss is Bowing  
Into Solitude—

-- Emily Dickinson

We had worked the daylight down to its ember,  
dragging dropped limbs out the fencerow  
and mending each frozen strand we could stretch

back to a post. My father twisted the wire  
barehanded: tiny curls of skin gathered  
around the barbs into papery wings,

stemless florets, ray flower, kin of the dogwood.

What startles about December snow is how it quiets.  
Ice is opposite, each step we took  
cracked sharp as our mallet ringing the spikes

as they reached deep into the split cedar posts.

As we topped the upper ridge, “Lord, God”  
was all my father said. Down the slope  
I could see the red and white bull calf,

his body splayed over the frozen pond,  
forelegs thrown out like a yield sign.  
We each held silent and still, the sky lowered,

taste of rusted nailheads sour on my teeth.

A sound like the rustle of barn swallows  
echoed through the measure of my solitude,  
my father gone for a rope and peg,

I was on my knees beside the crusted water,

searching the frosted eyes for a glimpse  
into another world, my cheek drawn down

by the pull of moisture and something else,  
something closing the inches between  
my face and the sound of bells ringing

from the dark stillness nearest the pond floor.

*II*

## River Gods

In the lapse-time of remembering, my life  
folds back through the warp of this city  
the way the Tennessee River winds through it,

and I live again on the north bank, in Maplehurst,  
watching the slow seep of barges downriver,  
my blood renewed and coursing old arteries again.

Years break apart, become sediment in the stream  
of those distant days, their blue-lobed nights.  
Twenty-two and alive only to feel.

Still, I dared it only once, walking the rail trestle  
where Cormac McCarthy's hillbilly Ulysses  
docked the houseboat and dragged his trawling line.

Since no one wants to cheat a foolish death alone,  
I convinced my friend to leave his satchel on the bank  
and we stepped out a hundred feet over the night.

We sprang from tie to tie, hoping for solid wood,  
for no rumbling train engine beyond the south hill,  
our nerve soldered by a half-litre of Maker's Mark.

The lights from Henley Street laced bright letters  
across the water, and we stood, staring down  
into a floating book, our bodies swaying like kites,

far above the circulations of ancient, whiskered fish,  
held aloft by the confluence of blind river gods.  
So much of the unknown rushing beneath us.

*The Night Café: North Rendon, New Orleans*

If we felt generous with ourselves, we drank well,  
Basil Hayden's at eight dollars a glass if Les ordered,

Marker's Mark at five-fifty if the tab was mine.  
Most of the tables leaned vacantly against their chairs,

The walls exhaling a low shade of green, the kind of room  
Van Gogh said a man could lose his mind in.

Our talking threaded through the light and into the dark.  
We argued the catalogues of the not-quite-Bob-Dylans—

Neil Young and Springsteen never matching the surreal  
Wandering blues that haunts Townes van Zandt's last records—

Then always into further obscurities and personal abstractions,  
Tenderness for the women we loved before our wives,

How those romances added up to lives someone chose against;  
Entire books we conceived in dreams but did not write, a travelogue

Of the Yucatan Peninsula, a study of empire in Herodotus;  
The children we could have had playing in watery shadows

Beneath the billiard tables, watching for a sign of recognition,  
Waiting for the names we never gave them to be called.

Whatever failures we recounted would never be trapped  
Inside the sweat-rings our cold glasses left on the tabletop,

Their consequences wiped away with the back of a hand.  
In the maroon glint of the bathroom's single hanging bulb,

The breasts of vintage centerfolds shone like the night sky  
Above Athens just after the Persians torched the city.

We felt our nearest experiences with death and transcendence  
Equal to the siege at Thermopylae, captured in our own *Histories*,

Recorded beneath swirls of smoke at a bar on North Rendon,  
*In the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance*

*Of what men have done*— thus the story opens, told like every tale  
That regrets where its ends, murky light rising above a forsaken city.

## The Bayou in Summer

One entire summer in New Orleans, mornings broke open like fresh eggs, cracked and spilled into a blue bowl of sky.

I drank coffee over the kitchen sink, watching sunlight glisten across roof shingles as far north as the Fairgrounds.

Some days I smelled the horses making their early sprints. Third floor apartment of the tallest house on Crete Street—

I could see the pressbox and the empty top row of bleachers.

By noon the heat was a second suit of clothes, and by three the first drops of rain sizzled on the sidewalks.

A storm would erupt, then subside just as quickly, the dead crustacean smell swirling, and finally the air cool enough to breathe again.

Then one day I awoke to rattling glass, and the quiet morning had crossed over. Clouds rolled in the color of concrete.

The electricity blinked out with the first wave of thunder and I watched as lightning skipped across the city.

Water stood and rippled in the street for an hour then streamed off underground.

Nothing moved on Esplanade as I crossed toward Bayou St. John— Saturday, ten AM and already the air ruptured.

I could smell coffee and bread at CC's, where I stopped and caught my breath, but didn't go in, walking instead up DeSoto, past Les's house, past Chris and Kim's.

A man opened a fence and carried some branches to the curb. He shrugged and smiled.

The Bayou never gleamed beautifully as it curled through Mid-City, but this morning the bowels of every Mississippi River tributary south of Minnesota seemed flushed into New Orleans.

Hurricane Katrina was two years away, but I could see the future in miniature spinning upstream in the murk—

Dry socket of a war just begun, blood and oil swirling together, everyone feeling wire-tapped, no child left behind, and across town the lower Ninth Ward strapped to the mast of a ship not yet sinking—

A mud-slaked turtle swiveled past in the current, dragged into the light, as though the whole floor of the river had been swept up,  
with no place to settle but the back of my throat.

## His Confession

I expected the worst when he tucked the pistol in his belt.  
Midsummer night, light wind:  
    it all suggested the road, open air.

A '76 Ducati doesn't thunder so much as express pure  
    high-pitched menace, falcon to a fieldmouse.

His confession: he still loves the girl at the record store.

    What about his wife?  
        She's not the girl.

Anybody can go to Mead's Quarry now.  
A nature center bought the land,  
                            made it public,  
but when we rode out we had to pry  
a fence open and roll the motorcycle through.

Midnight. One AM. Light-headed, heavy-limbed  
    on the cheapest beer at Kenjo Market.

He said, *I keep writing songs about her,*  
    *I call the store every night she works.*

*Forget it, I said, it's a bad idea. It's poison.*

*She's laid half the guys who work there, he said.*  
    *What about you?*

We took turns blasting bright eruptions  
                            out of the water,  
echoes hitting the pink marble face,  
    bouncing back at us like live fire.

The sounds sobered us—  
    we thought of houses close by.

*Fun's over, he said, dragging the bike out of the weeds,*  
    *but that God-damned moon's so full*  
                            *we should have shot it.*

## Sparrow

Flickering around the compost heap,  
swirled dust bunny, swept up & pitched out  
clanging a song I could forget in 10 seconds.  
You land in anything and somehow find  
a morsel, undigested seed in a jay's droppings,  
blind pink face of an earthworm underneath.

Hardly worth an ode, hardly  
demanding a full line of thought.  
Persistent, though, not quiet in the cage  
evolution built for you—  
your *blip-blip-buzzzz* a steady comment.  
What about? Well, nothing really,  
announcing sex, food, some early warning,  
nothing in it said for me.

Except I'm listening anyway, & making  
meaning where I want to find it.  
Probably your message is hardscrabble  
libertarian individualism: *Make do now.*  
*Make do now. Those not born to a fine nest*  
*can live under a rock, there's always something.*

Well, to hell with you, bird.  
Here's what I'm hearing:  
*Keep pecking, keep turning shit over.*  
*Don't stop singing because the vultures*  
*circle overhead—they love sucking blood,*  
*they will eat their own before it's over.*  
*Be ready. Be ready. Be ready.*

## Man Cursing the Night

-after Miroslav Holub

Someone  
stood up, paced to the window  
and squinted out.

Faint orange glow.  
Light with something terminal,  
light sick in its soul.  
Just parting the blinds  
gives it passage,  
invites the eyes to look upon it.

Pale glow.  
The clock has no hands.  
The clock wears a blank face.

The man at the window speaks:  
stay out.  
You worthless false-hearted beast.  
Stay out.

Stupid air. Stupid faded air.  
All you do is creep around.  
Slithery, dishonest cheat,  
a dirtbag, a clod,  
vandal, vagrant, villain—  
Verlaine after Rimbaud,  
Rimbaud *Après le Deluge*—  
occupier, liar, false testifier,  
Night, you have started a war  
for no reason.

Drag the night into broad daylight,  
beat it with a blackthorn stick.  
Night, you have come to nothing,  
all you do is trip up the days.  
Night, you misled me.  
I wanted what you promised  
and received empty pages.

Night, I received nothing  
but eyes that cringe and flutter.

Thus for a while he cursed the night,  
which curled around his feet  
like a faithful dog.

He stood in the very center of it.

The Pier at 5 AM

*Archilochus, political fragment 105*

The first glimmer of it, purpling of the black—  
That's why I woke you—  
Morning a present we might open together.

*Glaucus, see, the waves are rising and the deep  
sea is disturbed;*

Lisa, lost in the deep rushing of dreams,  
I have come down to you, bringing nothing

Except the promise of a spreading light  
beyond the pier.

Sea and sky fold into one dark hanging.

\* \* \*

*All about the heights of Gyrae stands a towering  
mass of cloud—  
I fall a prey to unexpected fear.*

Rain slants through us and we walk into its wet arms,  
Into the quiet of our separate selves,  
The mists of indifference, a lowering mass of cloud.

Can the second life of love begin this way?

Pass beyond stinging eyes and wringing shirts?  
Read these lines against the years, the unexpected fear—  
I woke you to call you back,

we let go too soon,  
High tide surges in, but we have all this—  
A day identical to night, wet darkness to begin again.

***III***

## Digging the Pond

The vision must have come after rain,  
a picture of water standing so deep  
a house could hide under it.  
He pushed and dug and cut through  
scrub pines like they were tall blades of grass,  
dragged orange clay from under the topsoil.

At thirteen, I mostly stood back and waited  
for rocks to lug into the nearest gully,  
sinking my hands under the cool mud  
so long buried, the runoff from two ridges—  
we found an arrowhead the first day  
and envisioned bone shards and lead slugs.

For years a hard rain would spill its banks,  
and pond lilies would sheen it with yellow  
through the warm months, before the drought  
years and otters did their work, and its water  
looked like something caught in a rusted bucket.

When my father stands on the bank and talks  
over what to do with the farm, he looks up  
toward the ridge-line and down at cracked dirt.  
He can name every species of tree, wild root,  
the compounds of the soil in every field,  
and knows that I stood off to the side too often  
to learn what he was born knowing.  
The doing and the undoing.  
I can find in his face what he reads  
about the future in the tea-colored water,  
his eyes and mine trying to avoid it.

## Piano Key

Corner fixture in the attic, collector of light debris,  
Bookshelf for old home décor magazines,  
My grandmother's unpolished piano.  
Banged on by three generations of children,  
None learning the notes, the scales, its life within.

No one mentions her playing, though the keys  
Lost their gloss somehow.

My father's mother.

She mostly seemed small and quiet, always old,  
Old her whole life, only speaking to say what hurts.  
Abandoned after her ninth child was born,  
Sent home to her own mother.

I plunk my way left to right, up from the deep-forest  
Bass notes toward high register fire-pinks.  
Just past middle C, a dead spot I remember as a child,  
A crucial note that will not sing.

Little key, did she bring you to life with a touch,  
Same as she did my father?

Were you part of a night time song

She kneaded into dreams for her sleeping children?  
Song I'll never hear, white peg bent to silence.

## Echolalia

White ash cradled in the fire grate  
still warm, a hollow body,

seething ancient whispers,

lost language.

Chloe speaks, then the words speak again,  
second sounds barely catching waves—

untold meanings float between us,

pockets of air tremble with the unknown.

Speaks then listens. Echolalia, her caged words.

Does the mind suspect betrayal in the throat?

\* \* \*

Walk past it in the woods and you might mistake  
the white ash for a hickory, with the same leaf-bunches,  
same bone-colored bark, but don't be fooled—  
you can know the ash by the length of its scars.  
It looks burned already.

\* \* \*

Chloe climbs and never looks down. She finds a perch  
between branches, feathered in a bright red waistcoat.  
Her eyes skip the middle distance, scan the horizon.  
She's seven years old, thirty feet in the air.

\* \* \*

I speak to the animals, she says, they know my heart.

\* \* \*

The meaning in our lives usually stands right beside us.  
We might pick it up and carry it into the light,

lift it to a higher seat, but we never own it.

What another person's life meant at one moment,

a speck on the continuum,

gave us our birth, and the body we pull away from it.

We answer to the name, yet never know the trail it moves along.

\* \* \*

When leaves whisper in the wind, she quiets,  
her lips move but make no sound,

some private language threads out through her limbs.

What Chloe hears hangs before me, a stretched canvas  
she works at with delicate gestures,  
her brush never touching the surface.

## Vista

Any day like this one, standing beside water  
Sunset glancing through the wind,  
Like Cezanne painted it, like he tried to say,  
Pink ripples through me but it cannot talk.

The clear vista of years seems to scatter—  
I cannot hold the pleasures in mind  
From evenings at home on the old Sundays?  
Morning slips past, words block

Their own saying, words that matter  
Rise up to speak and are denied.  
Born once to the world, once taken away,  
My mother, dear ship, sail, sea, dock.

## Reservation Snapshot

The rest of the day must have held a long drive  
out of the mountains, dreams of battles waged  
with arrows from the saddles of white horses.  
I knew where all the American Indian tribes  
lived, how they painted their bodies for war,  
the number of miles on the Trail of Tears.  
The crooked roads and steep inclines carried us  
back down to the life we have each lived since,  
the wandering and drift, slow years opening out  
past childhood's end and youth's front range.

A Cherokee in buckskin stands beside me,  
flashes a serious face for my mother's camera.  
Carolina mountain peaks rise up behind us  
and dissolve in a blue drapery of fog,  
but the boy I was then looks out as though  
he could see for miles, like he's just spotted  
signal fires from the nearest village.  
Seven years old, sitting on a towering white horse,  
his shirt clings to him in the drizzling rain,  
the bright feathers of his head-dress glisten.

## Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake

Cotton rolled his own cigarettes  
and made other simple things—  
a pantry cabinet for his sister's preserves,  
and a Hawaiian-style slide guitar  
that he strummed with a milk jug lid  
as he sang us cautionary ballads.

He was my mother's favorite uncle  
so no one talked about his woodstove  
churning through the middle of summer,  
his religious conversations with the television,  
or that he hadn't ridden in a car in eleven years.

My cousins and I gathered in a half-moon  
around him, and shivered at the warnings  
he sang to us against playing in deep woods  
where dreadful snakes liked to sleep,  
because terrible things happened to children,  
especially when they thought they were safe.

Each of his bedrooms was wallpapered  
with jigsaw puzzles, thousand piece  
replicas of the Eiffel Tower,  
a panorama of the Great Wall of China  
beside young thoroughbreds in racing gear.

Once my pulse surged to see my own face,  
with my mother and sister in an unframed  
Polaroid, taped to the wall among the rest  
of Cotton's widely extended family, the Mount  
Rushmore faces of our great Americans  
and the folded glowing hands of Jesus Christ.

## Devil's Snuff

My cousin David and I made a sport of it,  
Ranging into the woods to see who  
Could turn up the most,  
                    then smashed our shoes  
Down on the knobby brown heads of dust—

The devil felt so real to me that I trembled a bit  
At the spores spreading wide in the air,  
His hot breath breaking  
                    loose upon the earth,  
Our laughter another sign that he owned us.

## Drought Year

August 27

I.

No rain again tonight— none since when?  
Nine days, maybe ten. Before that?  
Its past keeping except by the cinders  
In my hands that were once purple hydrangeas.  
Standing under the thick haze of night,  
Palms turned up against the stars, expecting nothing.

August 28

II.

Four weeks ago their bright faces scanned the fields.  
They beamed like happy satellite dishes,  
Like a military band in yellow-rimmed hats.  
Now their heads droop as though nailed to the stalks,  
Dried and blackened eye sockets of the possum  
Carcass I found once, the soft parts cleanly picked out.

August 29

III.

A mattock thud of thunder and sudden dusk-light.  
Our three sets of eyes rise from dinner plates,  
First to one another, then to the window shades,  
As though a bulb had blown, a light switch cut.  
We opened the front door to a late-summer leaf shower,  
The sky so low above us, humming and not giving a drop.

August 30

IV.

When we crossed the bridge I was a child.



## Elegy for the Hay Rake

To every thing its season, and to every tool  
its final turn; to the Farmhand rake my father  
bought hard-used in 1976, rust has eaten away  
all your labels, all your sheen and simple function;  
to what I hope is my last sight of you, unhitched  
and standing in the field like a photograph  
from the Great Depression;

farewell to the cut hay left  
scattered on the ground to rot, nothing ate you  
but the soil that birthed you; to the tractor tire  
those long grappling points missed by inches  
on every sharp turn, you survived without puncture;  
to the long afternoon hours spent digging clumps  
out of the balers' clenched teeth, good money  
cannot buy you back;

so long to the lucky machine,  
lucky I won't sell you as an antique, that no one will  
paint you red, white, and blue and plant you in a garden,  
or hang you on a restaurant wall; goodbye to the five  
leaning wheels, their crooked tines turning, reaching up  
like broken fingers to wave hello, hello, goodbye.

Facing West from Cumberland Gap

*--after Robert Morgan*

Having followed the circling road  
Up through damp fronds of early fog,  
You might stand beside the chain-rock  
And look over steep ridge faces,  
Across miles and years receding

To D. Boone's vision of the West:  
Black bears roaming the underbrush,  
Ribbons of trout threading clear streams,  
Old growth stands of white oak, poplar.  
The chestnuts and wild peavines now

Vanished from these hills, from the wells  
Of their oldest soul's memory.  
The land existed outside all  
Money and accounts, no ledger  
Except time's steady deduction.

The Motherland of the forest  
Calls some of us still; we answer  
With the best sounds we can summon,  
Echo back the birdsong's bequest,  
To let each be what each will be.

## The Sunken Mill

A nest of trees across the lake,  
taller in their crowns than the treeline,  
too far from our shore to make out  
a leafshape or trace a pattern over the bark.

*Just below them trees about twenty feet,  
he said, showing with two extended fingers  
angled in their joints as a hammer claw,  
was your people's grist mill.*

*The old feller was blind, and that's what they  
called him, Blind Graves. I never knowed  
any other name for him, and I never knowed  
how he figured that they was a running spring*

*in the back of that sinkhole cave.  
He had water grinding his cornfeed  
day and night when the other millers  
waited till after light every morning*

*for the river to fill up the reservoirs  
before they could start to work.  
Tell me what use had them oldtimers  
for lectric lights-- they slept when it was dark.*

Now there was evening wind and LaFollette  
darkening beyond the trees and the underwater  
county line. Powell River moves as a basin ghost  
beneath the crush of Senator Norris' lake and dam.

*That goddamn socialist Roosevelt  
flooded all the bottomlands,  
for what? So the women could waste  
their days with the television stories*

*and menfolk could plug up one machine  
to saw wood, another to strip it  
and another to drive the nails.  
I wouldn't trade all the power lights*

*and tools and machinery they ever was  
for another night on a chestnut raft,  
seining these channels for trout  
and listening to the shoals*

*of the blind man's millwheel.*

*IV*

## Field Portrait

The man and woman stand knee-deep in grass,  
each balancing a small girl like a school prize.  
The man is tall and leans toward the camera  
while the child in his arms looks down,  
squinting at the tiny flares of her sunlit shoes.  
A wooden fence stretches out behind them  
in a row of short sticks, like tobacco spears  
snapped in half, around a small orchard  
of heavy-bearing apple trees and pear trees.

The woman's dress is the same color as the pears  
and it must be Sunday, for the fabric is neither  
muslin nor floursack, but looks to be fine as linen  
with a flower embroidery stitched along the hemline.  
She does not lean in to close the circle  
and she does not smile,  
though the children beam like lit candles,  
their dresses white as cinder fallen from the sun.

A drunkard's like a chimney full of ashes,  
more likely to burn the house down  
than keep it warm. That's what her mother said  
when she confessed they were getting married.  
She had thought it over and over, a man can change—  
she had seen him in the field, he could outwork  
his mule when it came to plowing corn rows,  
could sow six acres of rye grass in a day.

The pencil trace says, *Edith and Ken, Summer 1943.*

It is not hard to imagine how the man's body  
would turn on itself in the years to follow,  
become a natural enemy of his ways and wants.  
Spinal declension, eruptions of the stomach,  
sotted liver, stroke.  
He never got the farm he worked those years,  
got none of the money his father made  
when he sold it, none of the tools or cattle.

In the picture, one happy daughter reaches up  
to the apples hanging like Christmas bulbs

while the other, my mother, looks at the ground.  
Their young father, teller of heroic Indian tales,  
drinker of cough syrup and rubbing alcohol,  
stands with them, his life more than half over.  
Their mother never relenting, who will later stab  
his lip with a fork, beat him sober with a boot-heel,  
call him the saintliest no-account man  
God ever set upon the earth.

## Trade

Land swells and sinkholes forced hard angles  
in the roads, some just swatches through thicket  
and brush patch, others graded with gravel—  
those leading to zinc mines or river dock.  
After dark, the ringing pitch of an engine,  
slack and surge, slapshifted through the gears  
toward blacktop, clear liquor in the trunk  
sloshing against the tin lids of mason jars.

Horn Rogers in a black-primered Mercury,  
stub-nosed pistol riding on the bench seat.  
He'd pull around back of the brewery  
where bank fires were always lit, and meet  
Elzo Miller, who paid cash at the asking price,  
who knew quality was its own device.

The driest cavewalls beneath Weaver's Knob  
lined three deep with charred white oak barrels.  
Still hutches buried in the deepest pinewoods,  
where noon gets no lighter than the last hour  
of midnight's keeping. Artesian wellspring  
piped from an abandoned marble quarry,  
water streaming cold through copper lining—  
corn distillate with no sweetness lost to vapor.

## Revivals

The finest days of summer passed along  
with no effort at all—they opened up warm,  
got brighter through the hours, and closed down  
to the various singings and scrapings of night.  
Any resistance came from us, the whole family  
wishing and denying, turning on each other.

My job was to talk with the doctors, research  
the incurable, find whatever comfort reason offered.  
It was the worst job. I envied his sisters,  
my fawning aunts, who drove him to revivals,  
brought him under the hands of those who said,  
“Drink and ye shall be healed.”

So he drank and prayed and made great donations  
and erratic cells still shot out into every organ  
until we had nothing left but a morphine pump,  
a damp cloth, and windows open all night.  
No faith, no reason, my uncle grappling  
after his breath, and me trying to hold it for him.

## The Dawn Chorus

Pooled quiet of a clear night, summer, faint mist  
gives way to morning's upload, purple light rising,  
untuned performance of birds in chorale,  
Caps of clover glowing among the grass blades.  
Look around and it's all dapple-dawn-drawn loveliness:  
Lenten roses kneeling down for a drink,  
cardinals early to the sunflower seeds,  
but look further and you will see the tremble—  
the earth quakes in Balakot and thousands die in rubble,  
private worlds collapse in Haditha and lies cover it up.  
Look again and all is proof of time's slide,  
time's governing rule: it moves, and leaves us without.

## The Locust Bush

We walked among spindling frostweeds  
and dried tangles of raspberry briars,  
our shadows stretched like marionettes—  
the herefords bobbed their white faces at us,  
pitched strings of saliva over their shoulders,  
whipped their tails at the tormenting flies.  
Seed-pockets spun open in a biting wind  
and the pitch of our argument scattered,  
all sound tempered and slight,  
the meaning of accusations parsed.  
Our long steps slowed by the watchful bull,  
his head lowered to the timothy,  
snorting and grinding the sapless stems.

A swarm of gnats flickered dark as oil-smoke,  
each insect magnified,  
backlit by the ridge-leveled sunset.  
For a moment I was lost  
my vision abstracted—  
a place I had been so many times  
but never with the light changing,  
never with color so physical a presence,  
all angle and refraction. It could have been  
a field of snow, a field composed in memory.

Your fingers held light around my wrist,  
and we stood beside a shallow pond,  
drawing circles with a stick in the algae whorls.  
This seemed no place for questions:  
frogs splashed and called their bassoon notes,  
the white flowers of the locust bush like a drink  
poured onto the ends of their stems.  
It was a peaceable kingdom we looked across  
and a matter of the least importance  
how we came to be there.

## Blueprints

That year I lived by the river and spent most of my evenings watching neon letters blink and unfold down the opposite bank, the words JFG Special Coffee—“The Best Part of the Meal” descending into a water-prismed reflection of themselves. It had the closed-circuit appeal of television. I lived on the third floor of an apartment house called the Cliff Dweller with a few dozen books and a kitten my girlfriend found by the university library. She ate a gruel mix of powder and water, first from a dropper, then from a four-ounce baby bottle. She closed her eyes and dug plastic shavings out of the bottle with her tiny foreclaws. I started calling her Penny after she bit my mother, who said I’d like to buy you for the penny you’re worth and sell you for what you think you’re worth.

I read a lot of pages sitting on the concrete deck. I could see the tops of cars crossing Henley Street Bridge but their engine sounds never reached me. Sometimes I would smell Pall Malls and knew that Wade was outside. He had set up a bare-bones wood shop on his deck below me and I might hear the toothache sound of a router or a table saw. Once he showed me a poplar bed frame he was restoring for his daughter—I thought it was a masterpiece, a Stradivarius of headboards, but he complained that one of the columns had a blemish in the spiral design, and that he was thinking about sanding it down and starting over.

Wade and I mostly talked outdoors, in the driveway or by the mailbox, but once or twice I stepped inside his apartment, where the walls were decorated almost entirely with blueprints. He was eighty-two years old, and said he didn’t see how he could die so long as he kept in the middle of an unfinished project. I knew from our talks that his daughter taught at George Washington University, that she loved ballet, but no longer danced in public. I knew that he took his son to Grand Prix races at Watkins Glen when they lived in New York, but that some unspoken disappointment had passed between them, and that he favored the daughter most. All the year I lived above him

he didn't once mention a wife, even when talking about his children.  
The omission depressed me, but I could never manage to ask about her.  
I thought about it, but I didn't ask.

## Earthly Turning

The surface held  
furthest corner  
dropped into land's  
lost river  
through the heart  
its ancient course,  
by earthly turning  
Johannes Graf  
along its bank,  
our first home  
underwater

slate and still,  
of sky chipped  
deep pocket  
like a vein  
of the shiftless lake,  
set by mountains  
and lunar pull,  
built a lodge  
flourished with the soil  
in the new world,  
township  
now and ever.

## House Seat

Somewhere in these woods a child was buried  
Under a pile of white rocks  
But every person who could find that spot  
Lies now under their own stone.

We walk this back stretch looking for something  
That marked a life, not a death.  
My mother recalls nothing of the time  
She lived, not quite three years old,

At the bottom of this sloping meadow  
Grown thick now with young poplars.  
My father knows the direction better  
Than any of us, having strung

New barbed wire along Ike Johnson's old posts,  
Slow work done by hand, by foot.  
We find a sugar tree with a black trunk,  
Three hutches for whiskey-stills,

A pit deep enough to have been a well,  
Yucca plants in a straight row.  
No sign of the house, though the years have grown,  
Tiny bones feeding their limbs.

We make three generations in the flesh,  
Three short strands in time's long weave.  
Late wind shifts and my daughter runs ahead.  
The woods are full of footsteps.

## My Sister at Sea

Autumn shakes the air above Cayuga Lake,  
Snapping willow fronds like lofted green flags.  
Reading your recent letter threatens to break  
My grip, spreading memory's loose bags  
Before me, us at the ocean, my first glimpse  
Of boundless water, barely five years old,  
You swimming out, then under, a full eclipse  
That made my gut sink, fingers turn cold.  
The thought of losing you shot through me then  
Just as it does now, wishing I could bring  
You here to this shore, that we might amend  
Some old ritual, a spell of un-doing:  
Make your illness a small boat we could burn,  
Sailing out in ashes on the current.

*V*

## Mother's Milk

A couple of things she gave me:  
powdered formula mixed with water  
heated on a stove but held very near  
her heart, she said, while I drank it;  
the certainty that Jimmy Carter  
should have been president for life  
and that a yellow dog would be better  
for poor people than Ronald Reagan.

\* \* \*

By the time I was born, we had moved  
back to Sharps Chapel and taken over  
my great-grandfather's old house.  
My mother directed the small ensemble  
of our family: her kind sister, set out  
with three kids in a falling down trailer;  
her uncle, speaking mostly to relatives  
already dead; an aunt across the ridge  
whose husband tried to shoot my brother.  
My older brother and sister, crashing and  
dreaming their way through high school.  
My father parked his truck one day a week  
to clear fields or fix the ancient tractor.  
And me, the youngest by eleven years,  
born in the vacuum of her father's early death.

\* \* \*

My grandmother's birthday today,  
same as the great Richard Wilbur.  
Their lives begun a few hours apart,  
one spent tracing the beautiful lines  
etched over faces of baroque fountains,  
envisioning angels in the laundry,  
the other sweeping out hospital  
waiting rooms, her second job  
after years glazing porcelain conductors

to crown the tops of telephone poles.  
One life creating my mother, teaching her  
to make the least go the furthest,  
the other life rendering Moliere into English.

\* \* \*

I stepped out of the airport in Syracuse  
into the first darts of a swirling snow  
the whole western skyline dropping fast  
back in lake effect country  
\$38 in my wallet  
alone and wishing for home  
Sunday after Thanksgiving

\* \* \*

Once I tripped over a barbed wire fence,  
both legs tangled between the strands,  
six years old, struck down by the first  
barrier I thought I could jump over.  
She carried me home, my shins wrapped  
in a t-shirt and my ear close against her pulse.

\* \* \*

A few other things she gave me:

an ear for slightly off-pitch singing  
notes left lingering in throats  
from Loretta Lynn to Lucinda Williams—

unwavering loyalty to women who wear  
choppy haircuts and just-visible tattoos  
and who pay half-interested attention to me—

an avalanche of love and kindness  
the best suit of clothes a man  
can get for this world's embrace

To the Wild Strawberries at St. Mary's Hospital

After a long stagger through gleaming tiles and interlocking hallways,  
Through a glassed in walkway between buildings,  
Fighting off a milky, breaded, cafeteria smell,

I followed your singing to a concrete bench beside a flower garden:

A pair of bright red heads peering out of the mulch,  
Two wild strawberries grown in the sculpted domestic beds,  
Ignoring me from beneath the shrubbery's damp morning webs.

Why so quiet now? Mute messengers, you've lost your nerve.

You live in the shadows of plastic-looking purple and yellow tulips.  
An affront to hospital groundskeepers, the surgeons of the soil.

Summer air idling around us in the roar of central cooling units.

You were one of the disappointments of my childhood.

Scattered beautifully at the corners of the yard where I built castles,  
In fields where we spread salt for the lumbering cows,  
Along the road banks covered with gravel dust.

I defied my mother who said, they're pretty but you can't eat them.

You twisted my mouth into a ribbon, made my eyes stream,  
Left a bitter burning film on my tongue all day.

I don't believe you called me here to tell me anything good.

.  
You're not supposed to be here—you're an irregularity,  
A blemish, a spot on the x-ray of the hospital's controlled space.

When I try to picture you as a sign of hope, of happy remembrance,  
I recall a scene from a subtitled black and white movie:

An old man visits his childhood home and remembers his love  
For a young cousin, a Swedish maiden in a summer dress,  
How they picked wild strawberries together by a lake.

The pair coming back inside to a fine meal, a happy clucking family.

And then I remember his dream of the clock with no hands,  
The death carriage in an empty street, his own body revealed.

Late morning scrolling past and I can't go back inside.  
My uncle is in there, beginning the dying that I knew  
Would happen, that I knew I would run away from.

Life unfolding on a screen, real time and false space. Ever unfolding.

## On the McClung Warehouse Fire

Smoke hangs a dark shroud over downtown,  
menacing and moving north on the wind  
in a cloud of toxin, of cinder, and through the swirl,

the names of the founding commercial men disappear  
in smoke, hung in a dark cloud over downtown,  
gray faces adrift over streets named for themselves,

their great black coats twist and flutter overhead.  
Smoke draping a darkness across the town,  
menacing and marching north on the wind.

## Elemental Study

### I

All the windows open, a radio on the floor  
scattering quick notes from Charlie Parker  
at Storyville, the room off-balance,  
smoke, paint, August heat, turpentine.  
Jason circled the easel for perspective,  
like the strategic dance of a featherweight  
searching for the perfect uppercut angle.  
He loved the brush as he hated his father—  
purely and without sublimation:  
violence without cruelty,  
breaking the neck off a bottle once  
when we had lost the opener.

### II

That year at Labor Day we watched a blaring  
smoke-tinted fireworks display launched  
into the night sky from Henley Street Bridge.  
We waded through drunks and security cops  
down to the edge of the blackened river,  
our bloodstreams muddled and toxic.  
The air hissed and melted into glowering fog,  
fallen cinder drifting like a tarp on the water.  
For the duration of roaring marches and explosions  
we formed a still-life: image for the coarse-grained  
canvas he later smeared with a ground mixture—  
coriander, cigarette tobacco, garden mulch,  
stolen iris flowers, titled *Rough Composition*.

## The Double Life

Neither could say what brought them.  
Shapes in their likeness emerged  
across the wavering boards of the pier.

Staring down into the water's black mirror,  
she saw a figure turn and retreat.  
It was her longing to move beyond the body.

Shadows never misjudge their subjects—  
they impale thought and feeling equally,  
expose deeper textures of circumstance,

the disparate natures of love, its double life.  
Once there was another country, equatorial night  
with constellations blinking so near the balcony,

golden privacy of her arms closing around him,  
their future sketched by a hand cold as the waves.

## Hill Stomp

*--After Robert "Wolfman" Belfour*

Wolfman walks out of some dark pocket  
dressed like a man come to get paid.  
Holly Springs Mississippi  
shadows wherever he goes,

parts the path, covers his tracks,  
ghost town, carpenter's hands,  
so much Hurdle Farm grit under his nails  
notes jump dirty off the guitar strings.

All day building the skyline of Memphis  
to send money home for Norene,  
hustle down Beale Street at night,  
looking for a sign Black Mattie been there.

Mean-eyed Charley Patton in the blood,  
hellhound growling, howl us the life,  
invoke the ancient forms, Wolfman,  
sit down and sing us the merciful song.

Work seven days a week, still can't make it meet  
Jesus he love me, telling me not to go  
Love that woman, throw all my clothes out the door  
Love that woman, anywhere I go.

Wonder where could she be?  
O wonder where could she be?

## Storm Lines

### I

Straight overhead stars glimmer their usual  
Humid air shuffles up street and down  
North of here and west too dark too low  
Throw the tennis ball the dog throws herself after  
Ears prick up nose trembles  
Reverse patterns in the atmosphere  
Killing people right now north of Memphis  
Wrong pressures wrong circulations

### II

Night's too long voices too loud  
Do they wake me or is it hail against glass  
Lightning flickers awake adream adrift  
They want to come back they want to live  
Always children always dead and still speaking  
The same nightmare with me for years  
Look them in the eye and they have no eye  
Who are they who have they ever been







*VI*

## Red Lines

Leaving Knoxville in late August, I pass them  
on the road beside the close-cut field,  
half-dozen whispery thin local boys  
piled into the bed of a pick-up truck.  
The work of summer jobs finished,  
tobacco leaves strung up in barn lofts to dry,  
hay bales twined and rolled under tarp.  
I would like that feeling again of muscles  
drawn tight as fencing wire, pounding  
like an electric surge under the skin.  
I suppose they are headed home for dinner,  
to sit across from silent fathers  
and glimpse the end of farming season—  
6:00 AM shifts at Marlock, days spent  
riveting brass hinges onto cabinet frames,  
gluing particle board to the backs of mirrors.

For months after my first year of college  
I spent mornings suckering tobacco plants  
and evenings looking for an apartment  
in town, an alternative to those blistering days.  
I hated the endless measurement of it,  
pain equal to production, every hour given  
its weight and count and dollar figure.  
When these boys get up from empty plates  
they know where to look for one another,  
heading down Highway 33 or 25E,  
towards Jim's Place, or Opal's Lounge.  
They get to be drinking men early,  
load into the chamber of the fastest car  
revving the engine until it red lines  
and the tires slick down from squalling.  
They are more fortunate than some:  
design of history working as it does,  
the young men gain a sense of destiny.  
Some will die in hideous crashes,  
or worse, they kill others and live.  
But most survive these times  
and come away with their inheritance,  
a story of when the wheels left pavement  
and God alone knows how I held on.

## Thanksgiving 1984

The woman moves quickly with the knife,  
her tight shoulders ticking like a metronome  
as the knotty peels of potato after potato  
unfurl and drop into the metal scrap pail.  
She makes no sound as she works, no talking,  
no humming, her breath beneath her breath.  
Pots seize up and rattle their lids.  
She skins carrots, chops them into pennies,  
sets about smashing the softened potatoes  
with a wide iron spoon, never stops moving.

A boy watches from the covered dining table,  
draws long shapes onto a white page.  
Past her outline, exposed apple branches  
hold the lateral light of mid-afternoon,  
the air bright and crisp as a block of ice.

Other people move about the silent room.  
An older girl stirs sugar and lemon wedges  
into a pitcher of warm tea, then places  
a glass filled with ice at each table setting.

She stands close to the boy and smiles  
Down to him as she pours his drink.  
The woman, the grandmother, fills each dish  
from the stovetop and carries in the meal.  
The boy inches back from, then toward, his plate,  
into the scent of something golden and unadorned.

Ruble Johnson

The light cast from hanging coal lanterns  
cross-cut the floor planks and shadowed  
far corners of the barn hall. Hay bales lined  
either side from the first stall to the last  
and milldust lay scattered for dancing tread.  
A headgate lofted above the clipping stall  
and a rotted wagon bed off its wheels  
made the low stage against the back wall.  
Rube fiddled the lead to "Tanglewood Blues"  
before he stepped to the water trough, and fell  
dead with the ladle not quite to his mouth.

First came a slow silence and no commotion,  
then someone called for his brother Walter  
who had been in the lone nine card game.  
Walter got drunk and left, a boy whispered,  
but over yonder's his little sister.

There had been rainsqualls all through  
the day, but the night had cleared  
and the echo of the sister's prayers and curses  
would have carried past any weather,  
over the mountains and to the quickest  
bottom currents of the Clinch River.  
The night owls and the carp would have  
heard the grief at her brother's passing.

It was a year before the Great Depression  
but those times were hard to tell apart--  
one year the tobacco wouldn't sell at market,  
another year there was no gas for the truck  
to haul the crop to town, the dry months came,  
a grave marker went up under a black oak.

Ruble had been plowing the bottomlands  
one day in April and stopped for shade  
on a rise above the broad field.  
When his father caught up to him  
Rube said, "Bury me right here when I die."  
"Hush now, young fellow," his father had said,

“you’ll outlast me by thirty years.”

The sun was high in its arc and the stone  
that would mark that spot by June  
lay unshaped yet in the marble quarry.  
The day must have seemed still, and the heat  
leaving their skin never-ending, with only  
the faintest shadow for the men to come under.

The story passes down scant as noon shade  
from the water oak they stood beneath,  
that day so often told about, and so many  
who told it have crowded in beside them  
under the oak, under the sun-bleached clay.

## Detroit Muscle

I cranked the Camaro by sparking two ignition wires  
and the engine rumbled like a death foretold.  
Billy Thatcher rebuilt it with Knoxville Motor Speedway  
in mind, and got as far as an Edelbrock Torquer intake,  
Holley four-barrels, and a pistol-grip gear shifter  
before his money ran out and he sold it to my dad.

For a full year I had passed it twice a day on the school bus,  
marking its progress from a primed shell on cinderblocks  
beside Thatcher's garage, to something like a balled fist  
on wheels, a '69 Rally Sport, the very spirit of Detroit labor.  
I had glued together its exact replica on my bedroom floor.

We spent a summer tuning up the 350 until it hummed,  
and my uncle painted it the blue of a thunderstorm at dusk.  
The car sounded like lightning striking when I pulled  
onto the highway—it could lay streaks on the blacktop  
all through first gear and catch it again hitting second.

I opened it up one day on a gravel road in Sharps Chapel,  
windows down, "Statesboro Blues" blasting from the stereo,  
and I lost it—the front tire slipped the road and I went  
spinning, one ditch swallowed me up and spit me straight  
into the other and I landed upside down in a tobacco field,  
wondering where the road went and why I wasn't on it.

## A Short Life of Trouble

The room swelled with voices and strings,  
singing with Sunday morning intensity,  
two guitars rolling level underneath  
the steady rhythm like a car engine idling.  
Each voice in this quartet warm and close  
to me as the scent of their coffee brewing  
or summer air blowing through the open door—  
my mother, her uncle, his sisters,  
faces lit in harmony on “The Drunken Driver,”  
“Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake,”  
“A Short Life of Trouble.”

My mother picked out a G chord and sang,  
*Come listen young fellows, so young and so fine,  
Seek not your fortune in the dark dreary mine.*  
Now she is the last of them, a pure singer  
gone quiet now as the dust her players have become.  
It’s dark as a dungeon way down in the mine,  
but I would dig into the depths of the earth  
to hear those voices ringing out one more time.

## Taylor's Grove

We were five pallbearers, all grandsons,  
cramped into a car, no one seeming sure  
whether we should talk to each other.

*I don't know where my mind is,*

Roger said, *I was about to fall out  
here and pass the police escort.*

I laughed out loud and shaky,  
my throat clenched like I'd been held  
underwater and just broke for air.

We'd been driving for half an hour  
when Paul pointed and whispered,  
*look there*, showing the young Charolais,  
tangled in the fencerow, neck twisted.

Roger had nearly stopped the car  
before the calf saw us and pitched  
against the barbed wire, kicked free,  
and ran, still rearing, back to the field.

No one said anything else until we reached  
Taylor's Grove and pulled behind the hearse,  
its back door standing open.

We lifted her casket out of the hatch  
and carried our grandmother up a hillside,  
red clay mounting our black shoes.

## West of Raleigh

After I dropped you off this morning,  
I drove around in the rain, thinking about  
the afternoon we stopped by the interstate  
between mountain towns in North Carolina,  
coming home from a concert in Raleigh,  
for fountain sodas and chocolate sundaes.

It must have been December or earlier,  
the sky was winter-gray, and red streamers  
flapped like a flurry of cardinal wings  
between the Wilco station canopy  
and the rusted gasoline pumps.

We sat on the curb eating ice cream,  
the wind picking at our jackets.  
I remember a long oil-streaked puddle  
in the parking lot, how it reflected  
the heavy sky into a half-dozen  
prismatic clouds, such dark rainbows.

You will be at work today when I carry  
my grandmother to her place outside  
the world she hated to part with.  
Sixty years ago she carried my father  
into this world I can't get to know.

It all brought me to driving familiar roads,  
names on the wet street signs calling out,  
and before that, I was here  
this morning for you to kiss awake—  
a few moments of forgetting what it means  
to leave someone with the earth.

## Tennessee History

Purple iris flower and the full-throated mockingbird,  
The names of our three distant presidents,  
And, eventually, all ninety-five state counties.  
I learned the cash crops, the first governor,  
The course of every river that flows through,  
And where to find the lost State of Franklin.

Heroes were known by a single word: Boone, Crockett,  
Houston, Jackson, York.

I've taken on all their names,  
Worn their accomplishments like buttons  
On a shirt, imagined their battles and adventures,  
Played them out as a child over the trails behind my house.  
I spent whole summers searching for arrowheads,  
Any sign of the Cherokee, the Chickasaw.

I brought the past inside me, carried it everywhere I've been,  
Rode with it across the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico  
Coursing my blood beneath tamaracks in the Vermont woods.  
It guided me between gravestones of Taylor's Grove Church,  
The learning deeper in me than soil in the tread of my shoes.

There are many ways to study Tennessee History.  
One of them is to sit on Malcolm Walker's front porch  
As late afternoon unspools across his yard,  
And the hills of John Jess Lay hollow rise up around us.  
Listen as the soft cadences of his 91-year old voice  
Bring forth "Each Day I'll Do a Golden Deed,"  
The song Sawmill Dewey Ellis sang  
At Ruble Johnson's funeral, a great-uncle who died  
when my grandmother was only sixteen years old.

History lives in the songs, stories held within the earth,  
Most of it never written down,  
The truest part is stored deep in the boards of old houses,  
In the split rails of hundred year old fences,  
Etched in the grain of handcut wood.

*VII*

## Nightjar Songs

A truck hammers off in the distance, accelerates  
East toward Asheville, Smoky Mountain foothills.  
The night moves out with it, but not so steadily:  
Asleep by seven-thirty, awake at eleven,  
Still awake at one-thirty, at two. Does the moon  
Keep me up, loud, bright, insistently full?  
Wondering how to pay the electric bill?  
My daughter at six still refusing to read,  
Pleading that she was born with an animal spirit?  
The engine rattle fades and I step down to the grass.  
Two nightjar songs: one a low constant tone,  
The other a rising note, then silence, then rising.  
October's music.  
Oak leaves, early fallen, sparkling across the yard,  
All of it a feast, almost a pattern, almost design.

## Equations

In the afternoon light a red bird  
drops to a low poplar limb  
and eyes the mounted feeder,  
depleted since morning,  
then just hangs steady,  
pivoting his tufted head.  
Late winter and he is brighter  
than my daughter's wagon  
parked beside the plank fence.  
He becomes still, his black face  
aimed directly at my window.  
He rustles but doesn't fly.  
I know I am looking into something  
I have seen before, a memory  
rising from the substrata,  
when he bolts for higher branches  
and joins a half dozen other cardinals.  
I lose him in the crowd  
of lapsed recognitions,  
where he glides among the names  
of English sea captains  
and the sizes of Detroit engine blocks,  
floating past batting averages from  
the 1982 Atlanta Braves,  
and equations for measuring  
the velocity of falling bodies.

## Wrightsville Beach

Up early for a walk by the fishing boats,  
tracing your initials and mine in the foam  
of low tide, its spool of dark thread  
arriving like the wet shadows of clouds.  
Three red echoes of light in the harbor,  
only sign of life beyond the smashed pier,  
entrance roped off, furthest quarter lost,  
splintered legposts jutting from the waves.  
Shells the size of baseballs pock-marked  
the sand, their uneven curves preserved,  
concentric ridges crusted with salt-grit.  
One found the soft skin above my heel,  
pink-lobed conch shell—  
    crescent moon imprint, blood tattoo.  
I brought that shell home, and now it sits  
harmless on my desk beside a picture of you.  
I wonder if I could find your name written  
between hymns to Rilke and the Red Sox  
in my misplaced journal of those seaside days,  
when I sensed you a rising presence,  
tropical depression bearing in off the coast.

## Nocturne

Whatever's gray in the nightclouds  
lights the leaves against black branches,  
where they shiver like luna moths--  
October's blowing in with a low front:  
snow forecast in the Adirondacks.  
Lisa's hand, warm and bare in the collar  
Of my closet-scented coat.

We've walked out to the road to stand  
listening for the quiet that falls between  
the swell and ebb of car engines  
and night creatures rustling through underbrush.  
Far enough here from town to watch it play  
like a silent movie, pink and orange  
in the fog over Fall Creek.

We turn together to see the glowing  
in the window from Chloe's turtle lamp--  
I wonder where dreams have carried her,  
if she's on my shoulder reaching up  
for crab apples, or if she and Lisa  
are swinging around the bedroom  
listening to Duke Ellington.

Her breathing feels so near, above the  
whistle of moisture shaken from  
leaves, I can almost hear it—  
in all the buzzing of the night air  
I hardly miss the lost notion of silence.

## Whisper

Standing again at the mouth of First Creek,  
Rolling now beneath the city it nursed to life,  
As orange glide of sunset dropping from deep blue.

I can almost see my old apartment from here,  
“Slanted and Enchanted” rattling from the stereo,  
While love and ambition circled around me.

I know this low singing sound, above the water  
and between the trees,  
Time whispering back through its own open ear.

## Wellsprings

We turned the lake's slow surface to bright spanners  
With our underwater lures and orange-cap floaters.

Big Ellum, Lead Mine Bend, Capps's Creek,  
Artesian wellsprings behind the old house seat,

Flatwoods, Lost Creek, Palmer's Junction,  
Forks of the River, Mining Dump, Bridgetown.

We cast for bluegill, mostly, and hoped for bass,  
Since half as many would make twice the catch—

Our goal was supper, but we rarely earned that keep,  
My uncle and I. Though we slung our lines to the deep

Middle of Norris Lake, a hot afternoon on the shaded  
Banks of a hidden cove was reward enough, our muddy

Shoes left in the bed of the truck while we waded the shore  
Looking for arrowheads or fossil rocks. When we got bored

We propped the reels on forked sticks so Gerald could smoke  
Or play *Waylon and Willie* as I sipped a warm bottle of Coke,

And rummaged the glove-box for places he'd been, matchbooks  
From the Amarillo Armadillo, Flying J Truckstop, and Rook's.

Those nights we fished until dark were better than a child's  
Christmas in Wales, to be eight, mid-summer, home in the wild.

Cain Fork

Late October delirium of color  
Fire maples and dogwoods  
Flare along the creekside bend

Brotherhood of blood and change  
Museum of the soil's splendor  
Green earth's gallery walls melting

Sisterhood of dropped and scattered light

## Deep Corner

Impossible to defend,  
drop step and ball fake,  
shoulders squared  
then fade away.

Fingertip release.  
My brother's move,  
best thing  
he ever taught me.

I dribbled the grass  
out of the ground  
every day after school,  
bare patch in the side yard  
becoming a great coliseum.

My two shots:  
fade-away jumper  
And three-pointer  
from the deep corner.  
I'd bounce myself a pass,  
Catch and shoot  
in one motion,  
Nine in a row, ten in a row,  
easy as free throws.

My brother grown,  
sewing shirts all day  
at Standard Knitting Mill,  
having his own kids,  
while I worked on the moves,  
shooting into the night,

Everything dark  
except the white nylon threads  
swinging beneath the rim,  
and the moon-spiked caps of clover  
shining up through the grass.  
The ball spinning an arc  
against gravity,  
as my fingertips buzz,  
the net shushing back to me.

## Dream Life

In one dream my uncle came back from 1977,  
his beard shaved clean for a new job,  
the time I cried and wouldn't go near him,  
so startled by that blank, puzzled face.

Another time he visited from Christmas Eve,  
sometime in the late '80s, carrying a plate  
piled with turkey and potatoes and dressing.  
His hair mostly brown then, with a full beard.

For a couple of years after he died we spent  
early mornings together, my uncle and I.  
Now he appears less and less, and his face  
weaves in an ever-dissolving outline,

the way leaves in mid-October look  
when you try to remember them in January.  
My sleep drifts down to the silt and nothing  
pulls me up, no hand open just out of reach.

## For the Frozen Wood

At dawn, drifting snow gave the sky back  
to itself brighter than its first falling,  
inviting some fool out to stand slack,  
watch the slow light come crawling

to itself brighter than the first falling.  
I'm the perfect fool for a day like this  
watching the slow light come crawling,  
erasing the ground's darkened canvas.

Some would call me a fool for saying this,  
but I hear their voices and see lost faces  
rising from the ground's dark canvas,  
my dear ones searching for their places.

I hear soft voices and see loss in faces  
shaped like hollow versions of my own,  
my departed searching for the places  
where their bodies faltered and went down

in shapes like hollow versions of my own,  
inviting some fool out to stand slack  
where their bodies faltered and went down  
at dawn, snow giving what the sky takes back.

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## Vita

Jesse Graves was born and raised in Sharps Chapel, Tennessee, 40 miles north of Knoxville, where his family settled in the 1780s. He is currently a Ph.D. student in English at the University of Tennessee, where he is completing *Field Portrait*, his first manuscript of poems. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in Poetry from Cornell University, and has taught literature and writing at UT, Cornell, and the University of New Orleans.

Jesse's poems have appeared in recent issues of *Bat City Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Potomac Review*, and *CrossRoads: A Southern Culture Annual*. New work is forthcoming in *Connecticut Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, and online at *Town Creek Poetry* where he was featured poet in Spring 2008. His essay "Lattice Work: Formal Tendencies in the Poetry of Robert Morgan and Ron Rash," along with three of his poems, recently appeared in a special issue of *Southern Quarterly* on the theme of "Southern Poetry and Poetics."