

FALLING WITH THE FIRST LEAF: A COLLECTION OF ORIGINAL POETRY

by

STEVEN JAMES HOLLEY, B.A.

A THESIS

IN

ENGLISH

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Approved

Jacqueline Kolosov-Wenthe
Chairperson of the Committee

William Wenthe

Accepted

John Borrelli
Dean of the Graduate School

May, 2006

Acknowledgments

My special thanks to my peers in the graduate program for their help in providing invaluable feedback for my poetry throughout numerous workshops, especially Marco Dominguez for his willingness to discuss all aspects of poetry in a moments notice. I would also like to thank Dr. Bill Wenthe for invaluable advice and instruction in the writings of Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, as well as, the art of poetry in general, Dr. John Poch, whose treasured friendship was an important factor in my completing my education, and ultimately, Dr. Jackie Kolosov for showing the true passion that poetry should emulate. I would also like to thank my parents and my brother for their everlasting support, your support means more than you know. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Tina, whose never-ending support is only matched by her unique ability to act as my much-needed muse. I love you and would never have embarked on this particular journey without your encouragement.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. POEMS	
Building a Sturdy, Straight Fence	16
Freckles in the Chute	17
Two Days in ICU	18
Waves	19
Falling With the First Leaf	20
House Sparrows	21
Seasonal Wishes	22
Attic	23
Azure Sky	24
Go Inside, Wait	25
This Morning I Watched the World Wake	26
Revenge	27
Gratitude	28
She Loved You Once	29
Questions for Mimi	30
Questions for Grandad	31
How Wolves Were Introduced	32

(Im)Parting Wisdom	33
Sailing at Dusk	35
Never Got Out Alive	36
Branded	37
A Wolf in Dog's Clothing	38
You Want to be a What?	39
88 Points in 8 Seconds	40
WORKS CITED AND REFERENCED	41

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Some months ago, over coffee, Dr. William Wenthe told me a story about a writer who told his advisor that he was going to quit writing altogether and pursue another career path. The advisor told him to go ahead and quit. Nobody, except for the student, would care that he had quit, for as soon as he had given up, there would be a dozen more lined up waiting to take his place. The advisor was Robert Penn Warren and the student was David Milch, the creator of the HBO series, *Deadwood*. That story turned my thinking to why I wanted to write and why I was still writing. If nobody else in the writing community cared, why continue to do so?

Why do I enjoy reading and writing poetry and, furthermore, why should I spend the effort to help continue its lineage? Is it the liberty that poets such as Richard Wilbur and e.e. cummings have taken with sentence construction, the humor that can be evoked in the absurd (Simic's "Eyes Fastened with Pins"; Gudding's "In Defense of Poetry"), the enchantment of Robert Frost's or Elizabeth Bishop's natural observation, or the radical lines of John Ashberry and Wallace Stevens which showcase the beauty of sound? Sentence structure, humor and sound all reinforce the strength of a poem, but the trait paramount to capturing my attention is natural observation. Stevens's attention to the Florida flora and fauna in "Nomad Exquisite," can personify an otherwise inanimate environment. Instead of commenting on the stringy-ness or green-ness of the vine, Stevens describes the plant as "angering for life." Instead of merely existing, the vine not only wants to exist, but it is passionate about its right to thrive in its environment.

Alongside the characteristics of sentence structure, humor and sound, this is the characteristic that draws me most to poets like Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost -- their ability to celebrate the details in life that make it magnificent, their ability to take the minutest aspects of their environment and make them noteworthy.

I do not mean to say that either of these poets were environmentalists, but that their fondness for nature is a tool used in order to open a dialogue with their readers. Robert Frost uses a voice of sincerity and authenticity in order to convince them of his message, unlike Wallace Stevens, who favors a more academic approach. For example, Frost's attention to the environment in a poem like "Mending Wall" astounds his readers with intense focus on the minute details that readers of his time experienced everyday, but may have walked by without the slightest curiosity. In the poem, Frost describes his relationship with his neighbors, and by extension, the United States in the early Twentieth Century, through focusing on the act of replacing stones in boundary walls on his farm. "I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;/ And on a day we meet to walk the line/ And set the wall between us once again" echo Frost's personal choices of privacy and the nature of the United State's foreign policies before World War I. Frost negotiates the intricacies of politics through a window of hospitality, and it is this reason why, of all the poets I have tried to emulate with my writing, he is the one that I make attempts with most often. In poems like "Building a Sturdy, Straight Fence," I have tried to retain a voice of sincerity similar to Frost's while opening up a dialog with my readers, hoping that the normal, everyday occurrences that I have chosen to highlight will impress upon them the importance of natural observation. I want to help restore nature's place at today's poetic table. Obviously, this is an action that I cannot accomplish alone, but it is

an action that I see as a worthy undertaking given that natural observation has taken a back seat to sexual abuse and drug addiction as subject matter for many of today's poets. Anyone who knows me, knows that I think in the simplest terms and therefore try to use language that is as straight-forward as possible in my writing in hopes that my intended meaning is not lost in elaborate sentence structures or swollen syntax. In lines like "Plant each line post like it will have to hold/ The entire weight of the fence. It will/ Sooner or later," I want my reader to understand that if they explore their environments through naturalistic observation, they can garner a better understanding of how nature and culture can shape an individual's actions.

Not having grown up in the northeastern states, I was at a loss when I began reading the poetry of Robert Frost. He had numerous descriptions of labors and weather conditions that I did not have experience with. The first few times I read "Mending Wall," I could not understand why he was taking the time to rake the rocks from the soil, or why he was using them to build a fence that kept falling apart every year. In Texas, if the land is too rocky, it is used for raising livestock, not crops. Settlers in the northeast did not have this comfort; they lived primarily out of their gardens and needed the land to be suitable for planting; otherwise, they would go hungry during the winter. Through discussions with Dr. Wenthe and Dr. Poch, I now see that removing stones was not just a way to ensure that the soil was primed for planting; it was also a way of gathering material to erect stone fences to mark and maintain boundaries between neighbors.

In "Building a Sturdy, Straight Fence," I utilize the metaphor of fence-building to illustrate how taking pride in the assembly of a fence can be extended to one's practices in life. One of the most important memories I have of my father is when he taught me

how to build a fence. Granted some of the language is not written in the literal voice of my father, but the instructions that are in the poem are more or less the unspoken, yet invaluable, lessons my father taught me. I guess I am a slow learner, but I believe that everyone has memories of an event that supplies them with instruction later in their life, should they choose to look back with a magnifying glass. Poems like “Building a Sturdy, Straight Fence” and “You Want to be a What?” ask my readers to evaluate what lessons they have been taught that have lent them valuable guidance.

Another subject that shapes Frost’s poetry is snow. Living in Texas has not given me too many experiences with snow; therefore, I had to explore the cultural context that these poems were written in. Poems like “Storm Fear” and “A Patch of Old Snow” invoke a respect for a snow unfamiliar to me. Certainly the ferocity of the storms that Frost describes would be daunting, but the serenity that is available when the storms have passed, leaving a blanket of snow covering, everything must indeed be magical. Reading poems like “Storm Fear” and “A Patch of Old Snow” has helped me understand the value of observing my environment and gathering meaning from its actions.

Just as New England influenced a great deal of Frost’s writing, my poetry has been influenced by my geographic location. Having been raised in west Texas, I have a tendency to set my poems somewhere within the state, as in “88 Points in 8 Seconds” and “Freckles in the Chute”. Both of these poems are centered on an activity that I enjoyed participating in until around the age of twenty-one: bull riding. Instead of simply describing the clichéd wear and tear highlights that are showcased on the Outdoor Life Network every Saturday night, I try to show the more intimate side of the sport. “Freckles in the Chute” deals with one of my first rides and describes the emotional

rollercoaster that takes place even before the ride starts, and ends with the opening of the chute gate and the beginning of the ride. “88 Points in 8 Seconds” is a chronological account of the eight seconds involved in a ride, making the comparison between the brutal sport and the elegance of the bull and the rider as they “glide/ Like Fred and Ginger” around the arena. Both of these poems are products of my upbringing in the state known for its involvement in professional rodeo. Had I not been born in Texas, I would not have had the opportunities to become involved in the rodeo culture that lingers in the air of west Texas. The presence of livestock on my family’s land quickly became an influence on me as a child. I sought out as much interaction with the animals whenever I could; I enjoyed feeding the cows, riding the horses, and even cleaning the pig’s pen. I became involved in the sport through a friend I went to school with who had been roping since he was old enough to walk. Seeing the enjoyment that his involvement in rodeo brought him made me want to experience the sport. I started working several of the ranches in the area and soon began roping steers and riding bulls whenever I had the chance. I knew that my family would not be happy about my involvement in rodeo, so I kept the information from them until after I had stopped participating. The issue of their support was not the reason for my withholding my involvement, my family has always supported every endeavor I chose to undertake; but my straying from the family tradition of working in the oilfield would have raised more questions than I was prepared to answer at that time. I just wanted to experience the thrill of roping and riding without having to consider the worry I was causing my parents. Had I not been surrounded by these influences, the view of my surroundings would have not been colored by the experiences of working livestock and enjoying rodeoing.

Along with living in Texas comes the need to interpret the messages that nature sends you. What are the clouds saying when they clump together and darken before scattering altogether? How does the direction of the wind indicate temperature? Aside from the literal messages that nature sends, what about the figurative messages that you receive when looking at the swaying of the prairie grass or the protection a Fruitless Mulberry gives its seedlings when the rain is pouring? To say that because the wind is coming from a certain direction indicates that a cold front is moving in or that rain is easily predicted when a particular type of cloud is in the area is fairly unarguable. But what about the presence of tarantulas being an indication that Spring is over, signaling a coming shift into Summer weather? Is that a supportable statement or an inference that I am making, based on my experiences with a particular climate?

When discussing natural observation's meaning, both Frost and Stevens have differing opinions. Frost uses the natural world as inspiration for his thinking and often uses it for a springboard into the imaginary. This can be literally seen in his much-anthologized poem, "Birches," when Frost abandons the physical realm in favor of the metaphysical, but also in his poem "Two Look at Two." In this poem, a pair of hikers first comes across a doe, then a buck in the wilderness. The pairs stare at each other trying to figure the others' thoughts. Most of the poem is told from the deer's point of view, giving the reader the impression that nature has more authority than the humans. Frost wants us to believe that nature sees man as judgmental, continuously measuring man against preformed ideals that indicate whether or not man is suitable to co-exist with nature. This might seem like a dramatic view to take of Frost's speaker, but that is what attracts me to Frost: his ability to seamlessly blend the real and the imaginative until the

reader is no longer skeptical of the relationship between man and nature. When the deer leave, I know that each pair, both natural and human, has evaluated the other and recognized a beauty or resemblance of actions between themselves.

Wallace Stevens guides his reader with the needed information that will allow him to arrive at a comfortable conclusion. Stevens does this exceptionally well in his poems “Bantams in Pine-Woods” and “The Snow Man.” Both of these poems involve the reader breaking out of traditional thinking and focusing on characters that do not necessarily have to exist in order for their impression to be felt. The Chieftain of Azcan in “Bantams in Pine-Woods” is absurd if taken literally, but when Stevens uses him to inspect the relationship between the personal and the universal, the Chieftain becomes a lens through which the reader can evaluate his own importance in the world.

Stevens urges his readers to enter an introspective frame of mind in the poem “The Snow Man” and does so by using the relationship between nature and people. In the poem, a snow man is used to indicate the thinking of the everyday man, a man without imagination who cannot see the value his environment holds. Stevens asks his reader to place himself in the shoes of a speaker who is examining “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” If his reader is able to understand that it is necessary to imagine what is not there alongside what is, then he will come to the conclusion that nature becomes more meaningful when he has to imagine what could be there.

I have tried to emulate this kind of writing in “Waves” and “Falling with the First Leaf” in hopes of letting the reader observe and decide which meaning they see as most important in my poems. “Waves” deals with the relaxation that can be found through the natural observation when “posing walls/ That crash into themselves, then climb/ The

beach” attempt to smooth the frustrations of the speaker. Much like Frost used a personification of animals to react with the speaker, I wanted to use something transient, like water, as the object to which my readers can attribute a sort of refuge.

“Falling with the First Leaf,” the title poem of this collection, represents my attempt at mimicking Stevens’ use of natural observation as a means to a very definite end: the realization that whether or not we are in favor of a connection between natural observation and the lens with which we view that nature, the connection exists and can be utilized as a way to arrive at an understanding of ourselves and the traditions that have influenced our development.

Nature is not the only subject matter that is represented in my poetry. My attention to personal relationships is yet another connection I gleaned from Frost in poems like “The Death of the Hired Man.” In this poem, Warren, a farmer and, Mary, his wife, are discussing the return of a worker, Silas, who had left the farm several harvesting seasons before. Through the portrayals of Mary and Warren’s reactions, we get insight into their moral and ethical beliefs. Silas has not come back to work for the couple, but rather he has returned to die in a place that he considers to be his home. The couple’s farm was the place that Silas felt most at home because of the treatment he received from Warren and Mary.

Poems such as “The Death of the Hired Man” helped me to understand the connection between nature and personal relationships. My familial influences are more evident in the poems regarding my grandparents contained in this collection. Since both of my grandparents are deceased, I can more easily gather a perspective on the

relationship I had with them; as opposed to other personal relationships with which I have yet to gain a comfortable perspective. I have arranged the poems so that the reader will understand that nature and personal relationships form the foundation of my more intimate poems. Those poems focusing on the relationship between my grandparents were more available to me because I view them as a closed story.

The subject of my grandparents and their relationship is a closed story because they have both passed on, leaving memories as the only source of information for me to explore. Their story is available to me through stories I hear from my mother and aunts, as well as my own memories, and I do not have to worry about the story changing or offending either of them. This unwillingness to examine with any sort of magnifying glass the lives of those closest to me who are still living may seem childish or cowardly, but I would rather appear cowardly than transgress a boundary that would result in my damaging an existing relationship. That is not to say that my writing avoids all open stories involving family members or friends that are still living, but when doing so, I tend to emphasize the truths that I see as universal and relatable to my reader. For example, in “Azure Sky,” I wanted only the lessons of the situation to speak to the reader; instead of dragging them through the horrid details that led to the end of the relationship, I chose to focus on the eventual erosion of the relationship being depicted. My hope is that the reader will be able to apply that situation to their own experiences.

The setting of personal boundaries in my writing is an idea that I got from non-fiction author and poet Kim Barnes. In a Q&A session before Barnes gave a reading at Texas Tech University, she was asked what limits she places on her writing, a fitting question considering the intimate details her memoirs have revealed about her life and

family. After a few thoughtful seconds, she said that there is not a subject that she will shy away from in her writing, but that she has to be ready, mentally, to discuss the subject. She went on to say that a writer has to take everything into consideration when she is writing a body of work, be it poetry, fiction, or non-fiction, simply to understand how the subject affects the overall impression of the work. An example she gave was the break between her and her family. In her two memoirs, *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in Unknown Country* and *hungry for the world*, Barnes discusses the role that location and religion play in an individual's development. On the day of her high school graduation, Barnes set out on her own, breaking away from her family's strict Pentecostal beliefs and embarking on a life that would prove to be just as hard as the one she wanted to leave behind. When she began writing the first memoir, she feared what her parents' reaction would be, even though the events in the novel had happened nearly twenty years before.

I took solace in her idea that I could explore my existing relationships through the lens of past relationships, such as the ones I shared with my grandparents and the relationship they shared. In "Parting Wisdom," "She Loved You Once," and "Questions For Mimi," I wanted to explore a relationship that I only became interested in too late in my grandfather's life. Unlike Kim Barnes, I was writing about a relationship that is now closed; I could not go directly to the source in the same manner in which I am able to with an open story. I have come to realize that when I use writing to explore past events or relationships, I am doing so in the hopes of temporarily reviving the past; of making that particular moment new again. In this way I can relive a memory that I feel holds

importance. To me, the past is easier to write about because time places a natural boundary between me and the subject.

I try to treat my poems as though they are conversations with my readers. And since I do not include topics like sex or finances in my normal, everyday conversations, I eliminate them from my writing. Not everyone is like me, though. I recently married a woman whose family is French-Canadian; sex and finances are nowhere near their list of taboo subjects. However different this is from my own raising, I understand their interactions and even respect their openness. It takes a certain level of comfort, similar to the level Kim Barnes has reached, to be able to open yourself up and risk both criticism and praise with your subject matter. I have placed modesties on my poetry because I feel that I write best when I am comfortable with my subject matter. An attempt at writing a poem ripe with sexual innuendos would probably turn out to be something better suited for the comedy issue of *Poetry*, instead of *Penthouse Letters*. I am a product of the traditions and culture that were instilled in me by my friends and family; thus, they are better understood if taken in that light.

While tradition can be a positive influence, as I believe it has been in my own writing, two poems included in this collection concern people who chose to break their traditional lifestyles and venture into the world much like Kim Barnes. The first poem, “Never Got Out Alive,” depicts the tragic life of singer Hank Williams, Sr., a singer both my father and grandfather continuously listened to when I was growing up. The second, “You Want to Be a What?,” examines the hypothetical confrontation of poet James Merrill had with his father, Wall Street genius Charles E. Merrill.

“Never Got Out Alive” showcases how tradition can be defied and also accepted. Even though he was extremely successful in his music career, Williams forever sought compensation for being struck with polio at an early age. Williams’s story has both similarities and differences to my point that tradition strongly influences your view of your environment. Because he was stricken with polio as a child and could not work in the mines and perform ‘hard labor’ like others in his family, Williams’ choice to defy tradition was not his own. But the work ethic and attitude that he brought to his new career were eerily similar to those of his laboring family. He toured the country non-stop, often under the influence of alcohol and pain medication (sometimes both), and died at the age of 29. The haunting refrain of this poem (“No matter how I struggle and strive/ I’ll never get out of this world alive”), a phrase taken from a track of the same title, illustrates his sense of condemnation as he drifted through a life he saw as trivial when compared to those of his traditional family members.

“You Want to Be a What?” centers on the discussion that James Merrill must have had with his father, Charles Merrill. It is a discussion I envision having with my father when I decided to ride bulls. Since I never told my father that I wanted to ride bulls, I have to imagine that he would have reacted similarly to Charles Merrill. Had I told my father, I imagine that his acceptance of the situation would have been hard-fought. To go against your parent’s wishes and choose an interest that is completely different from those that they pursued is not an easy thing. I imagine that Merrill went through similar self-doubt when considering whether or not to tell his father that he wanted to become a writer and not a banker. James’s relationship with his father heavily colored his view of tradition as an existence lived within the walls of a bank. In the

poem, I try to indicate that the idea of becoming a poet was as foreign to the older Merrill as it was adored by, and necessary to the life of, his heir.

The placing of these poems near the end of this collection is meant to indicate that though tradition and culture influence an individual's outlook on their environment, it is also important to examine how moving away from your culture and traditions can lead to success. Both Hank Williams and James Merrill were hugely popular and successful in their times. With these poems, I also want to show that not all relationships explored through poetry have to be personal relationships. By examining the life of singer Hank Williams, I understand that success can come at a very high cost. By examining the life of poet James Merrill, I am able to explore my relationship with my father. Had I not ventured beyond simple family relationships, I would not have thought that this was possible.

These last two poems have also enabled me to examine my continuing relationships through the lens of the past. "You want to be a What?" has been extremely helpful in evaluating the relationship that I have with my father and "Never Got Out Alive" represents a general theme of the dangers of breaking out of my environment's traditions. Again, moving away from tradition or parents' expectations can damage the relationships important in one's life; but the risk can sometimes pay huge dividends, not necessarily financially, but with valuable experiences that have the ability to influence one's view of his environment.

One of the risks that I have taken with my writing career is the decision to voice my ideas in the form of verse instead of prose. I do not avoid writing or reading prose, in fact, I enjoy a good thriller as much as anyone. My tendency to write in verse is a result

of my wanting to let the reader come to an alluded conclusion on their own. Had I written the story of my grandparents in the form of a non-fiction novel, I believe that I would have revealed too much information, and that instead of enlightening my reader, his reaction would be too close to what I wanted him to think. I wrote (Im)Parting Wisdom in verse form because I wanted the details of the relationship to resonate with the reader and give him a chance to apply them to his own thinking. I do not believe that would have been possible had I explained all of my unconscious thinking about the situation. I want my reader to look at my poems and say, “What can I gain from looking at my past relationships now that I have some distance? Just like the speaker in “AzureSky,” how have my subsequent relationships been influenced by that one situation?” Simply put, I want my reader to think about his own life through the lens of my poetry, hopefully coming to the conclusion that even if the situation did not have a favorable outcome, it is still useful when looking at existing or future situations.

CHAPTER 2

POEMS

Building a Sturdy, Straight Fence

Tamp the dirt around the cornerpost
To ensure stability against harsh winds

And stout heifers. Always use a brace,
Just in case. Everything needs support,

Even during times of rest. Mark your line
And get it straight, even if it takes twice.

Plant each line post as if it had to hold
The entire weight of the fence. It will,

Sooner or later. At the other end,
look back; is it straight

Or gently curving like a tired back? Roll out
Your wire, barbed or not, and stretch

With care and a come-a-long, testing
For tautness. Don't let it sag,

Livestock will find weak spots. Bruised
And bleeding, you'll bend, but not break.

Freckles in the Chute

With a snort and a short hop, Freckles
Introduces me to the gate. Nodding,
I give the signal to unleash Hell.
The gate slings open. I'm hooked.

Dumped and lying at the fence's foot
The last minute reels: Sun streams
Through cumulonimbus. Squinting,
I strain to focus on one ton of Limousine
Caged and waiting. Protruding horns frame
Violent amber capable of extinguishing arrogance
With a simple turn in or sudden jump left.

With my chaps tightened and rosin ground
Into the leather of my glove, my hand
Invades the rigging and awaits binding.
First wrap over the palm then back around
To the thumb. It is the same
With the second until the rope weaves
Through my fingers like a threaded stream,
Settling into contentment. The wind
Stings dust into my eyes. Focus.

The wrinkles pasted on my father's weathered
Face speak the concerns he can't voice.
Sit straight, hand up, put your chin
To your chest, keep your center of gravity,
And for God's sake, come back in one piece.

Two Days in ICU

Swimming in morphine dreams,
For two days I move in
And out, never awake
Long enough to ask
Why. Noise climbs
Up my skull's walls.
Beeps, rings, whispers,
Sobs all splinter each other
Until the shards crash
And rise up, forming the sad,
Painted faces of the clowns
Who placed me gently
On the stretcher, then slid me
Inside the ambulance.

Waking, I roll
My eyes to the small
Window behind a blurry form:
My sleeping father's head.
Outside, a cardinal whistles,
Wake up, wake up.

Waves

Sometimes I don't come here for the fishing.
I sit on a converted lawn chair,
Toes in the powdery sand,
While the waves steal
My attention from a book
With posing walls that crash
Into themselves, then climb the beach,
Only to smooth into smiles at my feet.

Their foamy songs static the binding
Tension of a life lived within square blocks,
Under canopies of judgment parlayed
By zealous peers and lazy superiors.
I need to uncheck my lungs
And wear my vocal chords thin
With rants against ethical behavior
And the real reasons I don't get promotions.
This is why I will return to this chair tomorrow.

Sometimes I don't come here for the fishing.

Falling With the First Leaf

Stalled in the perfect moment,
It spirals down
Into rejection, until a soft breeze
And the gentle pull
Of gravity's hand
Ferry it past
The swampy flowerbed,
Over barbed shrubs,

To set it down
On the only patch
Of green grass left.
I watch the brown leaf fall
And fall with it. She left
And took my desire with her.

House Sparrows

I want to be in the back yard,
Sitting in a patio chair, content
As the house sparrows balanced
Along the rear wall's crest,
Balanced between the sun
And earth. Brown and calm,
The sparrows' subtlety warms us
More than the piñon fires
We lay before on evenings
When the fog of our breaths
Swirled up and into the trees.

Now, in this bleached room,
Sterile to the eye, you sleep
As I stare out a window sliced
Into a wall, needing to find
The sparrows, spotted and crowned,
That could have followed us from home,
Bringing hope tucked
Under their rounded wings.
Instead I find them poised along
A power line and listen to a machine
Scrutinize your heart with metallic beeps.

Seasonal Wishes

Having pruned the limbs
I stand alone, facing the heat
Of a broken generation.
In the crackling pile, linger buds and stems
Of potential that, left untouched, might have
Held lofty station. Now, smoke
Plumes up, shadowing the sun,
until I alone remain in a charred field.

Do trees weep for the return of their young,
Or sprout another ringed rung
To support their lineage for another decade?
Do the girthy trunks appreciate the unsung
Heroes who helped them to read the sky's blue?
Is there enough life in the coming spring
To make the saplings ring?

Attic

Nothing dies here.
Dresses spill out of chests,
Mirrors reflect streams of stained
Glass prisms that fall on a ruined portrait
And mimic oddly shaped boxes,
Like the pink and green
Annette hat boxes
Piled next to the globe
That isn't a globe at all
But a well-disguised bar,
Round like the sterling glass
My grandmother used
To admire herself
Forty years ago, when, young
But dignified, she mirrored
Another portrait, this one
Covered in dust and hiding
Her sharp cheek bones,
Angular nose, and auburn chignon.
It leans against the piano that's surely out of tune
But still silently keys *Moonlight Sonata*.

Azure Sky

It was the kind of azure sky painters
Capture, streaked with bone-sheered cirrus.
Had we looked up, we could have found
The comfort of being alone together.

Instead, we looked into each other,
Groping for sentiment like fern pinnae
Begging the sun for one more minute
Of sweet light. The fiery pluton did not oblige,
Only flickered before falling.

Too dark to see the splendors
Of your earth-brown eyes, we left
The blankets lying beneath
The unconcerned sky, hoping
We would return with compassion
Enough to welcome the descending quiet.

Go Inside, Wait

Leaves fall into weeping piles.
Gusts promise home
Only to fall short. Again.

We should go inside, you whisper.
Winter has arrived.

After he rides through, shocking meadow
And bow alike, crispening arms,
Stripping cardinal songs,

She will be forced to sleep
With a blanketing hush
While he slowly sucks
The water out of geranium
And gum until the veins shrivel
Into stalks whose arms touch
Ground instead of blue sky.

When Winter is convinced
That frost rules, Demeter's
daughter will rise again
And melt his hold
With soothing gold
That pours life
Back into the floral children.

This Morning I Watched the World Wake

Under magenta rays, I walk
Through the woods bordering my cabin
Engrossed by the sparrows'
Song, by night-silenced cicadas
Waiting for the return of a worthy heat,
And prairie hens praising the beams.
I imagine you honest
As the pine tree flowers
Whispering *Welcome morning*.
A ribbon of stream carries salvation
And trout to the edge where
Everything meets nothing
And consumes optimism's light,
Only to release it. Overhead,
The pine limbs stretch
And crack, dropping needles,
Cones, and leaves
Into the forest's quiet.
If the trees can proffer
Their seeds, I believe
I can forgive you your sins.

Revenge

A tree scratches against my upstairs pane
But does not wake me. Neither does the groan
Of the sagging hall stairs.
It is the glass
Shattering lament that wakes me.

In yesterday's abandoned shack
I found them. Six in all,
Under the failed work bench
Sheltering from rain. Twelve
Rabid eyes measured me.
She was not there.

With one foot out of the covers, I hear it again.
The moaning, long call sets the barn on fire
With chicken squawks and unbridled neighing.
I quickly dress and rush outside to the porch
Wielding a Winchester.

After I shot the last one,
I gathered them into a burlap sack
And waited. She never showed.

Lantern lit and raised,
I step inside the barn,
Finding every cock and hen
Gnarled in two by the she-wolf
I should have killed yesterday.

Gratitude

What if you had stayed?
Would we have matched curves
On the carpet, sung whiskey's
Graces, only to wake
With a filmed-over mouth,
Unacceptable to anyone but the dog?

It's good you left when you did.
Time would have shifted blame's
Ironic finger from you to me.

Don't think I resented the way
You eagerly climbed into my bed
Wearing the cologne of another.
Nor do I gag when I think
Of your lumpy gravy. But I do
Flinch when I think how carelessly
You kicked my dog
For chewing your shoes.
Those grotesque, pink stilettos.

She Loved You Once

I won't tell you
I could have left her.
Through my mother's stories
Alone, I know
She hurt you
In ways only a wife can
Hurt a husband: unanswered
Phone calls, ignoring you
When you arrived home.

I can't tell you
She didn't mean
To hurt you, I can
Only tell you she did
And pain eclipses apologies.

At nine, I left all hope
Of her beside her grave.
What did you leave?
Sadness? Guilt? The need to feel
Useful looking into the mirror
Above the vanity she insisted you build?
At least you know she loved you once.

Questions for Mimi

Why weren't you happy?

Did Granddad fail to give you everything you could have expected from a cow town?

Why 'Mimi'? Why not Grandmother?

What did you miss from Broadway?

Were the lights here too bright?

For how many years did you watch Dan Blocker on *Bonanza* re-runs every night?

When were you able to turn him off?

Did you want a bigger house because the Fulton's added-on?

Did pride keep you from playing board games with the rest of the family?

Did you ever want a boy?

Is that why you kept trying?

Was that out of sympathy or self-interest?

Could you have genuinely smiled without the muscles in your mouth snapping?

What would have happened had cancer not killed you?

Could you have smiled then?

Would you have given Granddad another chance?

Questions for Granddad

How was it living with three girls?

How was it living with three girls whom your wife groomed?

How was it living with three girls whom your wife groomed to be just like her?

Did you want your daughters to become too good for their surroundings?

Did you want them to be prim and proper to the point of slapping a boy when he suggested anything more than holding hands?

Was I your attempt at raising a boy of your own?

What was it like to live with a woman who grew to love you, then hate you, only to despise you for letting her settle?

Did she blame you for my mother's rebellion?

Did she blame you for my sister being conceived out of wedlock?

At what point did you move into another bedroom?

Did she blame you for cancer taking her, then you?

Was that how you wanted to die, lying on your bedroom floor, alone?

Did that have made you happy?

Once in the ground, next to Mimi, did you finally feel comfortable beside her?

How Wolves Were Introduced

The pup sniffed the mesquite bush,
Drawing in the bitter musk.
Then she bit into a dangling brown
Pod only to find it even more acidic
Than the smell. A young boy
Followed her. "Good pets,"
Uncle said to the boy
"Able to fend off snakes and bears."
"We don't have bears in Texas,"
The boy said. "Don't worry,"
Uncle said. "You'll find a use for her."

(Im) Parting Wisdom

I.

It was woven goodness, worn
And sweat-stained by a wife's unhappiness
And the berating Texas sun.
The black felt crown of the town
Competed with diligent creases
And a stamped silver band.

As a curious boy, I positioned both
On my head, quickly deciding neither
Fit as they fit the grinning gentleman
In the photos my mother carefully
Arranged on top of the piano.

II.

Once, on the fourteenth green,
After your approach shot glanced
The cart path, hurried through
The froghairs, and hopped onto the dance floor
With the same delicacy you showed me
When displaying your Lionel trains,
You hushed a curse and held
Your breath until the ball sank
Into the impossibly small hole.
Still standing over your putter,
You turned to me and smiled
The same smile Mom flaunted
In the scrapbook photographs.
On the way back,
I asked how you did that.
Simple. I held my tongue right.

I practiced holding my tongue for years.

III.

Even in pictures of her
As a young girl, Mimi always
Possessed a serious stare
Framed by an equally tight bun of auburn.

(Stanza cont.)

She was beautiful enough
That Dan Blocker, who rose
To fame as Hoss in *Bonanza*,
Wanted her to follow him.
You didn't ask that of her, though.
You let her choose
Between the frontier
And the fake sunset.
I know you would have
Followed her, had she asked.

IV.

I watched you sleep
During the Cowboys game
One Sunday while Mimi
Was in the den re-piecing
A puzzle she'd finished already
Because she wanted the sunset first this time.
The pale yellow leather of the recliner
Cupped your balding head,
Your hands settled on your stomach
As though they were keeping
It from bursting when you inhaled.
I imagined you dreaming of pastures
Full of Herefords grazing
On bluebonnets. Now, I know
You weren't listening to the game,
But the silence afforded once a week.
At six, I didn't know she hated football.

V.

It snowed the morning of your funeral.
Not enough to disrupt the service, just
Enough to layer a calming whiteness
On an already bleached world.
Yellows paled, blacks turned grey,
Reds all but disappeared
Into the smoke that had been clouds
Only seconds before. Being seventeen,
I envied the ground that now enveloped
You both in a gritty hug,
Listening to your journey towards reconciliation.

Sailing at Dusk

Illuminated by illusions of opportunity,
Dreams lace my sleep with captivating continents.
Still, morning recalls me to what I am to be.

Father was a bristling young man of twenty-three
When he began dressing ships with sails and filled absent
Dreams with visions of Caedmon's Cay.

A violent crosswind billows the stiff batiste,
Pushing the horizon until my vision is spent
And morning recalls me. I do not want to be

Hemmed into a corner of West Port Sailmakers, my only
Window blocked by hurricane palms and torment.
In a borrowed dream, just off the tip of the Florida Keys

I stand proud at the helm and observe the melee
Pitting Mother Nature against main topgallant,
But morning rises, reminding me of what I cannot be.

Like my father, I am a sailmaker: burdened with the ability
To harness others' winds. I must remain content
With dreams awash with euphoric adiposity.
Always morning recalls me to what I am made to be.

Never Got Out Alive

Your nasal wisdom befriended grandfather,
Your gospel serenaded grandmother
Baking love in her kitchen.
Polio rescued you from a blue-collar life
And enabled you to set your feet
Firmly onto soul discovery through music.
Payne strengthened your talents
With the blues. You mastered
Guitar, banjo, and harmonica, blending
Passion and tradition into an addicting obsession.

*No matter how I struggle and strive
I'll never get out of this world alive*

Gulping success in Memphis,
Kansas City, and even Baton Rouge,
You overindulged until the curtain
Came up and the Opry forgot
Six standing ovations and replaced you
With a red-haired stranger.
Payne never taught you the pain
Fame would bring, nor an easy way
To set the bottle down. Your bucket
Did indeed have a hole in it, my friend.

*No matter how I struggle and strive
I'll never get out of this world alive*

Drained in four short years,
You met the Maker in a Cadillac's back
Seat beneath the New Years' stars. Drifting
Onto the platform, you boarded
The lonesome train you always knew waited
In your whiskey-soaked dreams.

Branded

When I raised you
From the crib, you wiggled
And I caught you against
My fresh shirt and red tie.
Pulling you away,
I noticed you had been marked
By my tie clip, a cloved spur
And gilded initials imprinted
In the soft puffs
Of your reddened cheeks.

Did your mother tell you this story, too?

A Wolf in Dog's Clothing

He ate dog food and ravaged dog toys,
So, what else could he be? At eight,
The difference between wolves
And dogs was not evident to me.

As the years passed, his coat changed
From gold to white to silver and his paws
Eventually matched my palms in size.
Still, his eyes remained
Colored yellow with fury.
After just three seasons,
His ability to gather and shepherd
Surprised even me. Swing around
The corners, pushing the slower
Edges until they all ran
Together. Occasionally nibbling
A warning on a ewe's leg,
Just above her forked toes,
He protected the herd
With restraint.

At night, released by the moon's
Radiance, he would howl and pace.
Watching from the porch, hiding
In the shadows I wondered
If he missed his wolfness.

You want to be a What?

Little Jim must have looked mouse-big
Facing Charles E. Merrill,
A man weathered by years
And the Street. The boy gathered
His strength, attempting to stare
Through the intimidation he'd succumbed
To on several previous occasions.

After slowly inhaling, trapping
The vice as long as he could,
Father Merrill finally exhaled all his hopes
For this sole heir
In a ring of disappointment.

The paled fifteen year-old
Tried to swallow a cough
As the stinging fumes plumed
Towards gilded rafters,
Passed blurred tapestries, and finally
Swirled up to conjugate
With past slighted announcements.
But this time, piercing through the Cuban shroud,
Little Jim met the gaze,
And held it, noticing his father's
Tightly windsored red silk tie.
Finally, the old man broke.
And the boy said it again,
Louder this time,
A poet, not a banker.

88 Points in 8 Seconds

One starts it off with a nod, a yank,
And a spring. Two hops and twists,
Nearly throwing me. Chaps flip
And bells ring. Three strikes,
Propelling me forward, cursing
The rosin. Spit and dust ensnare
As we spin left then right. Flash-bulbs
Litter the crowd. Off balanced,
I dig in with spurs to catch up.
Through four and five, we glide
Like Fred and Ginger;
Matching steps to the edge
Without falling. Six rounds
Off in a high kick. I lean
Back and become part
Of the horned spear aimed
At the dirt floor. We teeter
Toward success until seven
And I squeeze my grip
On the rope, keeping
Me centered. Eight erupts
And the music lowers.
I lean right and unhook before
He dips left, raising his hips,
Sending me soaring
Over fresh-ploughed dirt,
Into first place.

Landing on my ass, I scramble
Away from twelve hundred
Pounds of pissed off
Brahma as the screaming
Savior-clowns swarm.

WORKS CITED & REFERENCED

- Barnes, Kim. In The Wilderness: Coming of Age In Unknown Country. New York: Anchor Books, 1996.
- Barnes, Kim. hungry for the world: a memoir. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
- Frost, Robert. Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1995.
- Stevens, Wallace. Collected Poetry & Prose. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1997.

PERMISSION TO COPY

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Texas Tech University or Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, I agree that the Library and my major department shall make it freely available for research purposes. Permission to copy this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Director of the Library or my major professor. It is understood that any copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my further written permission and that any user may be liable for copyright infringement.

Agree (Permission is granted.)

Steven James Holley

April 30, 2006

Student Signature

Date

Disagree (Permission is not granted.)

Student Signature

Date