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EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY HONORS SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Right Now, the World Is Ending: Collected Poems

University Honors Scholar Thesis

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Dr. Thomas Crofts, Literature and Languages

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An Introduction to the Poems

I began this poetry project after more than a year of writing little to nothing at all. I had already had some success with poetry, with a poem winning first place prize in my university's annual literary magazine, but I strayed from the art under the burden of school work and a particularly grueling stint as president of the student government. A friend of mine describes the facets of college like this: "There are academics, social life, and sleep. You choose two." I find that statement to be fairly accurate. Creative writing often gets the squeeze in busy times. Instead of amplifying creative thinking, education tended to have a dampening effect on my writing. I felt like I had something to say, but I could find no time to say it.

As a solution to this problem, I decided to use my Honors Thesis as an academic excuse to write poetry. I thought that if the poems were required, then they'd have just as much right to my attention as mathematical proofs and critical essays. The plan was to follow this pursuit just like any other credit course and end up with a satisfactory product when the school year drew to a close. What actually happened was quite different. Dr. Jesse Graves suggested writing a poem per day for the first couple of weeks so that we could establish a small body of work to serve as a baseline. The first night I sat down to write, the poems did not come, and this was painful. I

had this notion that there was something inside my brain worth writing, but all I could come up with was garbled prose and scribbles. What came from the next couple of attempts was pretty much garbage, too.

Then, on the Friday of the first week, something happened. The burn-out from the last year of school was setting in hard for my roommate and I, and we were sitting on the porch of our apartment, angry about the stasis we felt from being trapped working on trivial assignments. The metal table in front of us was welling up with rainwater, on the point of collapse. I knocked a hole in it with a nail, and we sat there for about five minutes watching the water slowly pour out onto the concrete. Somehow, I knew that this was what I had been waiting for. I grabbed my notebook and penned the lines that would become the first poem in the collection, "The Arrival of the Future." A trip to the past will clarify how that moment became a poem.

During my last summer at home, at the sprightly age of seventeen, I would spend a couple nights a week with some high school buddies out at the bottom of Cookeville Boat Dock Road, where it spreads out into a gravel beach on the Smith County side of Center Hill Lake. It was one of those places where, during the day, local families would come to swim and eat, and during the night, drunks and teenagers would go so that no one would know what they were up to. The lake is a standard TVA valley flood, and just like most other Tennessee lakes of its kind, a small town lies submerged at

the bottom. Divers love to explore the old church and schoolhouse. One night in August, we were talking by a fire on the lake shore with Bryan, an asphalt layer. He looked to be about twenty-two years old with the tell-tale Scots-Irish blonde hair. His chest was covered with a grotesque Celtic cross tattoo and his muscles were stringy. He told us that he had just been released from prison after serving a sentence for the possession of methamphetamine. He'd found work building new roads in Cookeville, but it would only last until the road was complete. That was ok, though, because heat stroke had already taken him down on the job twice and his back was terrible anyways. We were quiet as we watched the patrol boat lights glide across the water. James, the curly-headed son of a Legal Aid attorney, had been looking up at the stars. Then, glancing back down at the fire, he said, "Motion is an illusion. In any given moment, nothing moves at all." Tyler, the star and only atheist player on the Upperman High School football team, fired back, "Bush, that just sounds crazy. Don't tell me that the patrol boat over there isn't moving, because it is." The discussion turned to differential calculus: if the boat is moving 32 mph, then it moves 16 miles in 30 minutes, 8 miles in 15 minutes, 4 miles in 7.5 minutes, 2 miles in 3.75 minutes, and so on. It appears that during the smallest possible sliver of time, the boat would move exactly zero miles, i.e. not at all. But, if you add up any number of zeros you get zero. This implies that the boat remains stationary, and yet we see clearly that it crosses the lake. All of a sudden,

Bryan, who hadn't said anything during this argument, asked "so, there's no such thing as a moment?" The bark of a dog echoed across the basin. Then, we could see headlights at the top of the ridge across the lake, coming down the old road. Bryan got spooked that it might be the Smith County sheriff, and so he sped off in his truck.

When I read "The Arrival of the Future," I know that the memory of this night was dancing around in my skull when I wrote it. The poem is detached from the location of the story, and yet it carries the kernel of the theme of our conversation. The plot of the poem is based on a true experience as well, and yet that which imparts meaning to the event is remote from its time and place.

So, do we just wait for some event to be the Muse for our poems? If I have learned anything from this project, it is that poetry is a practice that can only be successful if it is attempted with regularity. For me, inspiration had always been there, and that explains my feeling of having something to say. All I had to do was hone my ability to synthesize experiences and express them in ways that would appeal to the sensibilities of others. The only way of doing this is, quite simply, to begin writing.

And reading, of course. I came into this project fresh off a semester in an Introduction to Poetry class, where I began to read poetry in earnest. After the first couple weeks of writing, I began, with the guidance of Dr. Graves, to seek out writers who could help to bolster my incipient style.

One of the first poets that I came across was the master of surrealist prose poems, Russell Edson. In particular, I spent a good deal of time with his 2001 publication *The Tormented Mirror*. I was drawn into a world of hallucinatory fable that had strong analogies to our own world. Edson has shown me that there is a way of talking about real life without being realistic. After overcoming the paralysis of not writing for a long time, the next biggest struggle during the composition of these poems was to find images or narratives that could successfully carry the theme or idea that I had in mind. I needed bones for the meat. For many poems, like "Brain Chunks," I opted for a rather surreal, Edson-like approach and contrived unrealistic settings. Rarely does one witness a police chief transforming into a sacrificial goat, and yet I can easily point to an event in the past which informed much of this poem's sentiment. Back in Putnam County, not more than ten minutes from the shore of Center Hill Lake, sits Ozion Baptist Church. During the summer of 1998, a black man was brutally murdered on the church by multiple gunshots by a crazy racist. Events like these are the stuff of legend where I'm from, and it's clear that this event is the starting point for the poem.

Taking liberty with the realism of a poem opens up a wide range of creative opportunities, but it also has a dangerous potential of creating an over-reliance on humor. This can detract from the more serious impact of the poem if it gets out of control. Several lines were excised from the less

realistic poems when I began to notice their dependency on humor. I hope that I have avoided that problem and left them with just enough funny to add to their bite.

When it comes to the grittier, more down-to-earth poems, I looked instead to a poet I had encountered during that poetry survey class, the Nobel Prize winning Polish poet Wisława Szymborzka. For Szymborzka, the world is terrible enough, and the addition of fantastic horrors is hardly necessary. It is from her that I found the essence of poems like "Compost Bin." Szymborzka's irony is nearly unmatched, and her poetry showed me how to use it effectively.

Ultimately, the poet whose writing I understand the least was probably the greatest influence on shaping what I wanted to achieve with this project. I am referring to that luminary native of Kingsport, Tennessee, Charles Wright. I was given a copy of his 2004 *Buffalo Yoga* that had been "languishing on a shelf at Books-A-Million," and was immediately drawn to his preoccupation with the great spiritual wealth lying just below the surface of the mundane world. Wright's poetry lies on the border between the physical and the metaphysical, toying with the boundary between the two with lines like "Everything's more essential in northern light/ Everything's more severe... Everything seems immediate/ Like splinters of the divine/ Suddenly flecked in our fingertips." I see this sensibility at work in my poem "Fishers of Men."

The reader will find little in the way of intentionally metered or rhymed language. The great majority of the poems are written in free verse, with line breaks chosen more for visual aesthetic than auditory aesthetic. However, I make no pretense of Poundian goal of 'breaking the iamb.' I try to write in the same register as the way I talk, and this incidentally causes a great many of the lines to have regular patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. If you pay close attention to your speech for a couple minutes, you'll notice that you talk in metrical feet more often than not. I suppose that it is a remnant of Shakespeare's influence. The main reasons why I do not attempt to mold my poetry to specified rhythms are that I am lazy and that I find the process somewhat laborious. However, I also believe that strict adherence to traditional forms can hamper creative potential, and in some ways the very definition of regular meter is limitation. Nevertheless, there are a couple of poems included that follow traditional forms. For example, "Entomophagy" is a haiku that I wrote while employed as a waiter at IHOP. It was originally embedded in a rather mediocre poem that was devoid of intentional syllable patterns.

Narrative is at the center of most of the poems, but it is not ubiquitous. In particular, the poem "Spaces" relies instead upon a series of chronologically separated images that flow into each other. A scratched scalp gives way to vibrating atoms then to cars burning fossil fuels then to an egg-laying reptile. Because the images are fairly concrete, a time-

ordered narration was not required to keep the poem cohesive. The first line, "Right now, the world is ending," may seem a bit disjointed from the rest of the poem, and to some extent it probably is. However, I wanted to emphasize the idea that our conception of distance lies at the core of our definition of time and existence. Objects are determined by the distance between them in the physical. When our notion of distance is disrupted, we lose the reference points that we need to conceptualize the world around us, and for all intents and purposes, our world is destroyed. This is really a poem about relativity.

Another poem, "Erosion," was written in close succession to "Spaces" and it deals with this problem of relativity as well. Instead of physical distance, it considers the mental relationships between ideas. What should we make of the line, "At first breath, there is nothing but axiom"? Nearly everything that we believe about the world is revealed to us through observation, whether direct or vicarious, and as newborns we have no capacity for understanding why, for example, the darkness and warmth of the womb has given way to the brightness and cold of the hospital. As we grow, our parents instill within us notions whose explanations are often omitted. A mathematician I know once told me, "axiomatic independence can be sacrificed for pedagogical reasons." That is to say, we can choose to present something as self-justified if the explanation is too difficult to understand or not necessary for the end. We all believe in ideas that we

cannot fully rationalize. Others of our beliefs are founded upon these truths that we hold to be self-evident. As we grow and learn, our axioms are challenged and altered, and the notions that stem from them can be uncomfortably disrupted. We live in the age of Gödel. No axiomatic system can be both complete and consistent. So, what is it that keeps us from falling into the despair that comes from never really knowing anything at all? Luckily, we experience life through our senses and our brains have an intuitive notion of occurrence. Thus, I hope that these last poems come full circle back to the ideas presented in "The Arrival of the Future."

Standing at the end of the road, looking back at what I have managed to write, it doesn't really look like the finished product that I had in mind at the outset of the project. Once I got into the swing of writing, it wasn't long before the poems took primacy over the monotony that my other academic work had become. In many ways, this project maintained my sanity through a turbulent time when many of the thoughts swirling in my head nearly overwhelmed my ability to persist with the game that we all play to earn that piece of paper declaring us to be 'liberally educated.'

I owe immense gratitude to several people, without whom these poems could never have existed in final form. First, I thank my parents for instilling a love for language in me at an early age. Second, I thank my roommate, Landon Zink, and my partner, Sarah Kenny, for being the first readers of most of these poems and for listening to my incessant rambling.

Third, I thank the readers on my thesis committee who have sacrificed their time to help improve this project, Dr. Thomas Crofts and Dr. Keith Green. And last, but not least, I am eternally indebted to Dr. Jesse Graves, who mentored me throughout the entirety of this project and who taught me the indispensable value of writing as a tool for understanding the world.

I sincerely hope that you enjoy these poems.

The Arrival of the Future

Stillness bore down upon me in October's purgatory.

Much like my soul

Water sat pooled on the patio table.

Before general collapse, I pierced it at the center

With hammer and spike:

The drizzle on my feet under the table

Beside the point of impact

Time passing residually, not directly

Full waning empty,

Potential waxing manifest

As nothing becomes something.

Could it be a gyre, shrinking instead of widening?

The red digits flash from 2:59 to 3:00,

Yet I can never mark the division of moment,

No satisfactory rings of foam around my glass.

In the minutest increment, does the water move at all?

Physics says that it must, that time

Does indeed pass, and that movement

Is a function of the flow.

The table was full and now it is empty

My feet were dry and now they are wet

And, as best as I can tell,

Something has happened.

Transience

After millions of years of radiating,
Stars kick it fairly hard. They explode.
Bits of oblivious star dust go their merry way.
It is a quick death.

But these bursts go unnoticed for millennia.
Earth, a backwater planet, is hard to reach.

Now, the star dust has clumped together.
A Latinate monkey arises from the ooze.
After great pains of labor, she holds a baby
In her hirsute arms.

Supernovae are notoriously unpredictable,
And so it was that the monkey's brain blew
Without warning.

She had written a letter for the occasion,
Because no one makes it out alive:

“Daughter, thou art the stuff of stars.
Love always,
Lucy.”

Bojangle's

Sometimes little girls become mothers
Of even littler girls, and they work
Making chicken biscuits and sweet tea
For the workingmen who come in at 7
And say very little.

Toddlers sit with grandparents who have relinquished
Themselves to eternal Bojangle's breakfast.
The littlest girl asks her grandfather if he wants to play
He replies, "No, honey, I don't want to play today."

Mother would probably play,
But she's sweeping the parking lot and
Using her precious time to smoke an L and M
Because she's grown up enough to have one.

Entomophagy

Tiny winged roaches
Underneath sticky syrup bottles—
Health code violated.

Compost Bin

I squirm through air as
They squirm through mud,
But worms have no questions.

Coffee grounds and grass clippings
Egg shells and rabbit droppings
Banana peels and apple cores
Rot in the bin.

One worm smells newly tumbled additions
His hunger-panged ambition
Drives him toward my discarded fruit.
He doesn't remember the last time I visited,
And he has no concern for my intentions.
He eats what he smells.

Others beat him to today's prize.
They are boring into the ovary's remains.
The fruit is no damsel, fit for only one suitor,
And worms are not equipped for violence.
To share is virtuous. He may be able to
Impregnate one of his competitors or
Be fertilized himself.

Above, I'm counting on his libido.
His id will feed my tomatoes,
And when his offspring chew their way
Through my brains, mine will feed theirs.

Decomposition is the Last Solace of Nature

I.

The coal miner rots in the shadow of the mountain,
His own pickax buried in his entrails.

Tired soil rises to claim him,
Immersion into the pulsing capillaries of the pines.

Young hills have plotted this revenge
From the moment their first black-hearted ancestor
Was obliterated by chemical fire.

There is nothing left of Rocky Top
But the stench of flesh and expended powder.
Decomposition is the last solace of nature.

There is no rest for the miner's soul.
Look how the vultures descend upon him.
They gnaw at his bones and squabble over
The fleshy bits of his neck. He is digested
Then excreted into the Tennessee River,
Via the Clinch.

II.

The meal completed, the vultures turn their eyes
Upon the children of the miner.

“We cannot consume the living, for they shall
Surely overpower us,” says Bernie, King of Vultures.

Financed by graft from fishers, farmers, and factorymen
In far-away places, the vultures open Vul-Mart.
Low, Low Prices.
The children could not remember milk so cheap,
And so the trap was sprung.

The vultures enjoyed the fresh taste of the ones
With no coal grit
Under their nails
Or in their lungs.

Elegy for Savagery

I clip the vestiges of claws
And chew them by habit.
I paint them red
And file them neatly.

I brush my dull incisors
After biting into a tomato sandwich.
I chip them on a lemon drop
And visit a dentist.

I shave my hirsute face,
My pubis, and my legs.
I lather my skin
With beeswax lotion.

My brain cannot escape
Questions of purpose.

Contemporary Christian

Moses never lived, but he appears before my eyes
Through Joel Thompson's Video Ministries, Inc.

*For the word of God is quick, and powerful,
And sharper than any two-edged sword.*

A first soprano holding a staff
Sings to Ramses II.
I want to believe his witness,
But I don't think I can.

Paul did live, but the Nazarenes hated him:
He said that the Gentiles needn't know the old law,
Nor cut their foreskin. He lost out, or
So reveals the penis of the West.

Now the booming voice of God
Sounds from Mt. Sinai,
Warning us about golden calves,
Revealing divine jealousy,
Killing the firstborns
Of the houses with no blood.
Tremble, mortal.

*For the word of God pierces
Even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit,
And of the joints and marrow,
And is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

Attila Retreats

This evening, the Bishop of Rome is looking east,
Towards Constantinople.
He adjusts the papal hat,
Under which many inquiries fidget:
Will the East destroy sound doctrine?
Will the priests forget their vows of chastity?
Will the heathen submit to Petrine primacy?

Meanwhile, the Scourge of God has crossed the Danube.
He's hacking and cackling atop a fine Russian steed
Whose misty breaths rise and dissipate like the smoke
Over Persia, Macedonia, and Troy.

This Attila comes for gold and women,
He despises the Christ for his weakness
And would have slain the messiah himself
If afforded the opportunity.

But lo! Leo the Great is coming out of the gates
With choir boys and crucifixes in tow,
Saint Peter on his left shoulder
Saint Paul on his right.

Attila cowers in fear, and retreats his riders to the Steppes,
Never to return, Dying on his wedding day from pneumonia.
—Or am I lying to you?

Perhaps you should ask the Holy Church!
There are many treasures in Rome,
Knowledge chief among them.

Erosion

At first breath, there is nothing but axiom.
The red world is irreversible and inexplicably white.
Giant aliens mutter strange sounds to one another and to me.
The one with a shiny pendant smacks my ass, holds me high,
And says "Congratulations!"
Now, I have begun to cry.

I am still crying, not understanding when you say,
"People do not rise from tombs. Physical impossibility."
How then can our sins be absolved?

Every limb of an oak must die
When the trunk is severed.
Every leaf will wither.

So does a corollary lose its proof
As its premise falters
When the inalienable is alienated.

An anecdote: A man is lying on a hospital bed
Coughing blood into a bed pan.
He will die soon. Where will he go?
This is, of course, his final thought.
All of his truths have thus been sacrificed
For pedagogy.

Anxiety: how thou hast cursed me
With the erosion of the knowable,
Dispelling the fog of innocence,
Revealing nothing but a wasteland of mystery.

Brain Chunks

The police are tidying up the front steps of the First Baptist Church.

“Cola will eat away the blood, but what the hell
are we going to do about the brain chunks?”

“Easy,” grins the chief investigator, “just use the rake!”

When the last piece of brain joins the heap,
The investigator turns into a goat, the other officer into lambs,
And the steps into an altar.

The headless priest arises, grabs the rake, which is now a knife,
And screams, “Hypocrite, thou Pharisee!”
As he slits the throat of the goat.

Nearby, naked wrestlers shake their heads at the barbarity,
Then return to their sport.

Fishers of Men

I.

The open container law had been changed,
And so it was that me and the boys were
Busting it down I-26 East, sipping boldly
On malt liquor and Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Autumn mountains and their half-naked trees
Bathed our hearts in the requisite grandeur
To spark discussion of creation and God's existence.
Seldom does such talk bear edible fruit.

Scott: "You only perceive order because of your mind's categorizing tendencies!"

Frank: "But our presence here is nothing short of miraculous!"

Me: "And the overwhelming beauty of it all!"

Jim: "Pass me another beer!"

II.

For a town of granola, beads, and libation of all kind,
Asheville charges a hefty price for parking.
Frank hands the bearded man a ten, and after banter
About tonight's show, we pull into a tight spot.

People: in banana costumes, on stilts,, playing guitars,
Smoking cigarettes, eating noodles, running, dancing,
Discussing the law, waving glow sticks, selling scarves,
And holding religious signs protesting all of the above.

III.

Inside the auditorium we are separated from the front row
By a barrier of red-upholstered theater seating.
The guards watch keenly, but a moment of ruckus affords
A chance to vault into the pulsing sea of dancers.

C major build-up, thirds walking up the scale crescendo,
And as the microphone descends into the crowd,
The super-C comes not from the head dressed Icelandic man,
But from Jim's mouth, like a sword.

We rejoice in the streets again, climbing a balcony
Hailing the anointed one among us, smoking cheap cigars.
But the police approach! A moment of silent crouching.
Scott vomits as the blue lights pass.

IV.

Riding hump back to Tennessee, my head lowers,
Filled with dreams of fishing at Cane Creek,
Throwing them back as quick as I'd catch them.
Then I am called to cast aside my rod.

Then I am called to follow.

L'Orage

“Forty-seven years means I’ll be out when I’m sixty-five.”

-Convicted of armed robbery

Prepare yourself, America
For a storm is brewing.
You are a land of liberty
With many bars.

Arm stalwart sentinels
With automatic bullet sprayers
Or you will pull a toothbrush shank
From your eye.

Pay the corporations
To oversee the details.
Unleash the Panopticon
On every city.

For the Republic,
We must put murderers
With murderers
and murder them all.

Pedestrian

I pass Green Valley Institute in September's sunny breeze.
Gleaming metal traps the bodies of those
Whose minds are unconquerable.
But there are trees, and there are mountains,
And the inmates have their own flower garden.

Today the yellow pedestrian light flashes
Holding the traffic on 11-E
As the well-behaved are escorted across the highway
On leisure.

One lady stops, gazing through my windshield.
I squirm in my seat, and feel compelled to yell,
"Run!" Her eyes are blank.

Then she starts laughing,
And laughing, and laughing.

The Origin of Evil

The old man warned me
Of a moccasin-infested lake.
We can drop our lines in that shady spot.

So the boat slides through the water
And I see them swimming:
Swiftly slithering Ss.

In a laboratory down the road,
Specimen jars commemorate a great victory
St. Patrick in the 21st century
How lucky that these unborn cannot sink
Their fangs into our flesh.
Forty-seven embryonic stages yield
Forty-seven containers,
A great chain of the dead.

These children dance in the biologist's dream
Suspended in placental mass
Waiting to be born into the light.

They will open their eyes in a garden,
Where a certain lady sits,
Her stomach rumbling for want
Of succulent fruit.

Spaces

Right now, the world is ending.

Spaces are growing arbitrarily large,
Houses appear smaller outside than in.
The whole universe could fit into my skull.

Comfort is a scratched scalp,
Massaging the world, and every tiny atom
Vibrating within it, telling us
That one of the final seconds
Has slipped into unobtainable history
Which is memory, where I remember a red car
And you remember a blue car,
Cruising down the strip, burning the putrescent remains
Of an ancient reptile who met an unfortunate end,
But not before she looked up to the sun, blinked her eyes,
Which, through unfathomable processes become our eyes,
Laying her eggs--tiny spaces containing
Everything we are and will be.