1983

The Hummingman, poems

Donald Neil Wolfe

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation

Wolfe, Donald Neil, "The Hummingman, poems" (1983). Retrospective Theses and Dissertations. 84.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/84

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
The Hummingman, poems

by

Donald Neil Wolfe

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1983
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREFACE</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PART I. DISPERSAL</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Water</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric Redemption</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motel Six</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeppelin in Clouds</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raftsman</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissus the Crane</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introspection</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhas and Gargoyles</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stars</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stars Again</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Missiles Fly</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moctezuma</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toward the Moon</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View from the Front Porch</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well of Paradox</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Sky</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunk in the Library</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispersal</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART II. GUILLOTINE</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preacher</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Deluge 29
Guillotine 30
Anchorite 31
Advertisement for Beef 32
The Dice 33

PART III. THE HUMMINGMAN 34

Birth of the Hummingman 35
The Hummingman is Wounded 36
The Hummingman Sees Jesus 37
Confusion of the Hummingman 38
Hummingman in a Cage with Lovebirds 39
The Hummingman in Space 40
The Hummingman on the Moon 41
Hummingman with Anchorites 42
The Reminiscing Hummingman 43
Joy of the Hummingman 44
Modern poetry is a pale-faced, wasted genre, long ago confined to the terminal ward of the social imagination. Its vitality has been sapped, and its position in American culture usurped by the electronic media: films, radio, and especially television. The traditional standards of poetic excellence have no great bearing on the issue. It matters not so much that poets still aspire to quality, inspiration, and genius as it does that there are few people willing to read their works. The inescapable fact is that mindless sitcoms and soap operas beamed into countless living rooms across our land are having a far greater impact on the lives of average Americans than poetry has had or ever will have.

Illustrations of the subordination of poetry abound. The question of the day is not "Who is W.S. Merwin?" It is "Who shot J.R. Ewing?" The world almost stops spinning when the final episode of M.A.S.H. is aired, but one must hire a detective to track down a book of poems by Galway Kinnell. Here in Iowa, the common citizen's concept of poetry is a rhyming political essay by Curt Sytsma in The Des Moines Register. Perhaps the most telling indictment against the status of modern poetry is that Rod McKuen is probably the best known poet in America, and even his unwarranted popularity is waning.

One could argue that poetry and television are not
comparable, and that popularity is no basis for comparison in any case. It is not as relevant to me that poetry is somehow "better" than television as it is that poetry has lost the attention of the public. Indeed, poetry has never had the attention that television enjoys. Spare time is a precious commodity. Possibly the most important measure of any nonessential activity is the amount of people's spare time it fills.

Nevertheless, some would maintain that poetry is alive and well as a communicating art form. These diehards simply overrate the power of the modern poem. And even they who profess to a faith in the efficacy of the genre often read very little poetry unless required to because of their professions or fields of study. Contemporary poets, like ancient gods, are exalted by only a few. The transistor-hearted gods of the twentieth century, on the other hand, inspire hours of daily devotion.

Why is the ratio of hours spent before the tube to hours spent reading poems a zillion to one? Why aren't the names of the best modern poets seen in the headlines of magazines and tabloids in grocery store check-out lines? Why do volumes of poetry virtually never appear on best-seller lists?

The answers, like the demons exorcised by Christ from the insane man, are legion, and they mock those of us possessed of the notion that poetry should be important.
But the miracles of today's saints--Edison, Einstein, and the other apostles of science and technology--cannot be undone. Nor can the changes wrought in the hearts of men by the knowledge that the apocalypse is but a push of a button away.

Imagine, if you will, that you are a doctor trying to diagnose the illness of poetry. You begin by looking for the overt symptoms. The most noticeable difference from the poetry once thought to be the grandest of art forms is that modern poetry has lost its rhyme and regular meter. These traits remain in the lyrics of songs, but poetry itself has discarded the musical characteristics that once provided much of its appeal. Metered, rhyming lines tend to stick in the memory in a way that lines in modern verse typically do not. But these are symptoms, not the real illness.

As you probe more deeply, measuring the pulse and peering down the throat of poetry, you discover the disease itself, and it is something akin to paralysis, probably psychosomatic. The ideas of poems are obscured where once they were prominent. The imagery, once the muscle surrounding the marrow of the poet's ideas, no longer clings to the bone; rather it tries to provide its own structure to the body. Unsupported by skeletal ideas, it is helpless to walk.

Reading poems from pre-modern eras, or even the poems of Whitman, Dickinson, and other early modern poets, one
senses that these poets felt that they had an important message to convey. They wanted to be understood. They needed to communicate. Their poems, it seems, were written with a full light shining on their minds and hearts so that what was in them was clearly revealed.

Conversely, reading modern poems is like wading through a swamp in a fog. We may hear the sounds of the owls and the bullfrogs, and smell the stench of the rotting logs. We know well enough we're in a swamp, but we're lost! However receptive we are to the imagery and the sensations of modern poems, we are often in a quandary as to their meanings.

Meaning! That's the key word. That's what people want from their art forms and entertainments. There is no paucity of images in their own experiences, but they expect the artist to give meaning to those images. Dissecting lines on a page for hidden or nonexistent concepts is a slow, demanding, and sometimes futile process, but in a mere half-hour on a television sitcom, the problem, the resolution, and the moral lesson are all acted out in unambiguous situations, with a few yuks thrown in to boot. Television, in this sense, is like a loyal advisor on a broad range of issues, and as such has taken over the social duties that poets, and even many priests and politicians, have shirked.

This is an age of uncertainty. Every modern yin has
its yang, and every thesis its antithesis. The typical response of the poet is fear of the yin because of the yang, and fear of the thesis because of the antithesis. Rather than take a stance, the modern poet embraces—or too often, is paralyzed by—the paradoxes presented by science, philosophy, religion, and socio-political theory. Poetry as a vehicle for the expression of ideas has been supplanted by poetry that serves as a playground for language.

This stance is fine, for the poets. Readers, however, who search poetry for some illumination for their souls, find that the meanings are like rare birds in a dense jungle. Modern Americans are too easily discouraged from pursuing them, and understandably so when we consider how easy it is to obtain gratification by turning a convenient switch.

It may appear that I hold modern poetry, or poets, in contempt for their failure to meet social needs with methods and results superior to those of television programs and their writers. Actually I don't. Poetry still serves an important function, I believe, which I'll discuss in a moment, but its primary role is no longer to be a mode of communication between poet and reader. Communication cannot be the primary role of poetry, unless more poets come up with substantive ideas to communicate and/or become willing to put their ideas into forms more readily compre-
hended by potential readers. However, I'm not advocating that poets should make such an effort, nor do I believe they will be very successful if they do.

The poems in this volume do not, for the most part, attempt anything more than most other modern poems, and often less. Many of the poems don't make "sense." Their images may create certain impressions or induce certain emotions, but when they contain ideas, they are more often than not difficult to decipher. Their meanings, if any are intended, are not likely to be quite the same in the minds of readers as they are in my mind.

I stated earlier my opinion that poetry still has an important place. The primary function of poetry in contemporary America, I contend, is to provide benefits to the poet. The poet stands to gain far more from the writing of a poem than do the readers of it. You'll recall that we imagined ourselves doctors examining the dying body of poetry. From that point of view, which was the perspective of the perplexed reader of modern poems, we saw the corporeal form of poetry. But the spiritual form of the poem lives as vitally as ever in the heart of the poet.

The poems in this volume were written in my bedroom before dawn, at tables in the dark corners of bars, in shabby motel rooms in small Iowa towns, and behind the front desk of a motel where I worked the night shift. I wrote
each poem because within me there was an inexplicable, urgent, and commanding desire to restructure old memories and to learn why those particular experiences stayed with me when others were forgotten. I envisioned no audience when I wrote them. That you, who presumably intend to read my poems, actually do read them, is inconsequential. I do not ask to be understood, even by myself. I am no Whitman, who would ask the multitudes to join in his democratic chants. Let the masses tune in to The Love Boat, if they wish. I prefer to write poems.

This is the real goal of the poet, then, in my mind—not to become more popular than Laverne and Shirley or to impart his wisdom to the world—but to heed the call of his own inner voice when it asks him to consider the meanings of his life. And when each person becomes his own personal poet, he will no longer require his electronic pacifier.
Black Water

A boy thrown helplessly
Into the back of a station wagon
 Watches for the glow
Of the towns beyond Denver
Always after nightfall
Gaping at the milky sky
That domes the distant cities
Hoping for a swimming pool
At the next motel
Hoping its waters will be clearer
Than the sky over Pueblo
And the black mirrored surface
Of the pool in Boise
Electric Redemption

This is the redeeming thing
That we in civilized prescriptions
Described the cure for rigor mortis
Of the spirit and
Allowed old ways to expire
In inevitable arms uncomforted
And new ways to flourish like babies

Poems scribbled now in a motel room
Are the last lights out
In a darkened city
But behind drawn shades in other rooms
Are the flashes and radiant glows
Of video illuminating the souls
Of the populace
All of us each of us
Sharing in private pleasures
The cumulative freedom
Earned by our thriving forebears
Heirs of a new era
When chaos benevolently reigns
Motel Six

In the last motel room
Cezanne will be a cardboard memory
And stale cigarette smoke
Will linger when the occupants are gone
And in that room
Where many beertabs will be pulled
Loneliness will be as inefficient
As the clanging furnace
And voices will be heard there
Leaving a trace of themselves
To whisper to the dreamer
In the last motel room
The very last one
While he sleeps near the freeway
Zeppelin in Clouds

In the year the decades turned
From protest to introspection
And from commerce to doubt
A picture was drawn
In the sky over Portland
Of a zeppelin in the clouds
In silence hovering
Over the junction of rivers
Like a plump old watchman
Guarding the night
While a star shone down
With a singular beam
To enlighten the city
In an ambiance of protection

A young man looked skyward
And saw a dark cylinder
Dissolving in the clouds
And believing it illusion
Was content
Raftsman

The brown-skinned man is used to the sun
And the pace of Jamaica
Poised on the bow of his long raft
Poling down from the Blue Mountains
To the warm sea or
Poor Sisyphus
Towing his trade upland
Through the ganja fields
Stopping at home on occasion
To share a succulent pineapple
Until in the blue smoky light of morning
He pulls his raft the last few miles
To the foothills and the lush river banks
Where he waits in the shade
For the Thursday bus
The the big tippers who arrive
Pockets bulging with America
Narcissus the Crane

Narcissus rose up among the shrubs
In the garden of love
And unfolded his wings
To stretch before flight
And to dream
Of transcendence and return
Or
Narcissus stumbled down the path
To a bitter pool of wisdom
Where he saw his own reflection
And again
Narcissus rose up
Among the little Japanese shrubs
Introspection

At last you see yourself
From outside a frosted window
Looking in like a peeping Tom
Forgetful of the night-air chill
As you gaze at your own nakedness

And you are the object
The girl-child daydreaming
On your virginal white sheets

Guarding yourself like a wolf-shepherd
You crouch in a shadowing hedge
That hides you from streetlights
And the vast glow of the city

And you the watched
Lie open and unsuspecting
While disturbed eyes feast
Buddhas and Gargoyles

Late at night in the lounge
The things that seemed grotesque
As I stood at the end of the bar
Were the icons of Buddha in booths
And the gargoyles on stools

Bathed in lavender sensual lights
And wearing the beatific countenance
Of a patron saint of alcoholic causes
I was properly puzzled
And went home scratching my head
Stars

Forgotten stars on the edge of the eye
Are unseen when the fog lies in close
Like permanence or when
In a pastiche of stars and planets
And a quiescent moon
They are hand-drawn complex stars
Sliding on the knife's edge
Like slow motion luminous thumbs
And are cut on the equinox like diamonds

Like jewels on black satin
The stars are on display
And in each intricate facet
Reflect their human lovers' desires

The stars know they are forgotten
But do not forget themselves
And will come to us again
As orgasmic fleeting meteors
To remind us of love
Stars Again

Romantic notions I had
Were like comets or stars
Fading in and out of the sun
To glisten on muggy nights
Like drops of cream
Or to flash on clear nights
Like sparklers
On the great American fantasy
Fourth of July

Men and women and Earth and cosmos
Exhale in unison the mighty breaths
Of the spirits and the elements
That are not an American dream
But a fine romance
Pure and real
Not money
When Missiles Fly

Already you cry
At the thought of deprivation
And moan of wars to come
And bombs to fall
And you tear out your hair
While speaking of the night
When airbursts will brighten the sky
Like sudden suns

You weep and pray
To be spared the underground life
Of sterility and hunger and deformation

Your tears stream like rivulets
Down your anxious chalked face
No longer tame nor vague
But as sharp as the executioner's blade
Defined and shining
And you wail and you writhe
While the doors of your personal hell
Close behind you
And the missiles soar
Over the continents of your imagination
Moctezuma

Moctezuma resides like a lizard
Under the shadows of our stone hearts
Too primitive for our European manipulations
Carelessly plucking out the throbbing organs
Of those who would tame him
And washing in a tide of blood the impurities
With an unfamiliar savagery

Even now his tongue darts
And his reptilian soul lurks
Beneath our mailed breasts

We are never to be rid of him
And when at last the searing sun falls
He will come out
To offer a final sacrifice
Toward the Moon

Toward the moon
Orange
Autumn
And full
The wolfmen howl
And their breaths burn the leaves of dry trees
And frighten away the squirrels

Through the forests the wolfmen prowl
Toward the fires
The cabins
The dining tables the silverware
The candlelit reflections in the spoons
And their distorted images
Bring froth to their violent tongues
View from the Front Porch

A comet's tail or the track of an electron
In a cloud chamber dissolving like the land
Beyond the east-side shade of the front porch
Eastwardly bending toward Maine
Each mile bridging another in swollen space
Sulphurous as the industrial wind
Spewed out empty and bitter and stinking
Polluted packets of energy which dance like sailors
On the precipice of my tongue
Eastward also in the dusky light
With friends gazing
Crushing leaves beneath restless shuffling feet
Leaves that have littered the lawn
Disdained by the neighbors
But something less of a threat
Than nuclear waste
Well of Paradox

Tired of the honest voice
That whispers commands
And of manipulations
I stop to rest at the dark well
And to draw out the living water
Chaotic and churning in my cup
To be nourished by the drink
That creates and destroys itself
And stirs in my belly the poisons
And the nutriments of life

I draw buckets full
Never to be satiated
With the changes and the paradox
Big Sky

He heard the mountains singing
Of an old undying dream
That urged him to sell his last possessions
Cash his last paycheck
And get under the big sky
And heard the waves lapping Pacific shores
And smelled sea breezes as fragrant
As the sweetest love potions
And the voices he heard calling
Of the forests and rivers uncaring
Whether he was loser or winner
Or taker or giver
And he waited for the winter to end
And the sun to climb higher
Waited to drive out tomorrow
To the big sky
Drunk in the Library

Drunk in the library
The old dancer climbs to a tabletop
To chant his obscene song
To the readers
Who annoyed
Are scowling as he serenades the authors
Each by name
And when his audience disperses
He invites them to hang
From gallows of living wood
And he spins and leaps across the room
With an echo in his mouth
While the readers are crying
Crying
On the covers of their books
Dispersal

Banished and scattered
Poems are like Israelites
Or like windburst dandelions
Infertile and supplanted
By a new and noxious weed
Made of circuitry and oak
With its own healing properties
And its own cruel power
To shock
PART II. GUILLOTINE
Preacher

The boy who hoped
Preached to a congregation of the Lord
And stood by the sanctuary door
To watch his flock file by

He should have known
It was a waste of time
But he preached again
Sunday morning with the blurred vision
Of the Spirit and a hangover

Preached eyes closed
And stomped the altar
Waving his Bible like a six-gun
In the faces of those who
Complacent as lambs
Were too innocent for bullets
Or lobotomies
The Deluge

He approaches you
Las Vegas
From the high desert
Driving down through the heat waves
Down to the Black Mountains
Down to your neons
On the first day of creation
To your oasis there
The mecca to those new persons
Who would sin or like him
Combat it and
The angels herald his coming
Skimming the sage-pocked Earth
Like supersonic jets from Nellis
Swooping in like your storms
And like the wall of dust
That proceeds the fierce rains
Which deluge your Sundays
With the waters of love
And immerse you in his song
Of the apocalypse
Guillotine

The preacher held his Bible high
Its leather red as a guillotine blade
And gave the low prophetic cry
Of the wilderness and the wounds
And the dust and ashes muffling
The consolation of prayer
And the shuffling of the flock
Driven through the night
By the howls of the sinners
And the fear of night while
The preacher's voice echoed
From dust to dust
And the sheep dispersed quietly
To wait again for morning
And the slaughter
Anchorite

He breathes the thin air
And has knowledge of cloud tops
And patchwork fields
And tiny humans
Seen with Solomon's vain eyes
From the pinnacle that soars
Far above voices crying in agony
That there is no joy
Voices repeating the criteria for joy
Until the meaning of joy
Is drowned in cacophony

Here
In the silence and wind
A bitter chill
And the mystery of death
Advertisement for Beef

Changing high-water boots for street shoes
The Holy Spirit saunters down the avenue
Seeking victims

He will translate them into languages
Which are nonsense to the koine
For the folk of twenty centuries
Have choked on the raw bloody words
And are used to hot beef after all
And make distinctions
Between the words and the truth
The Dice

Following our lives with gleeful eyes
The gods shout their expectations
As we stumble from cool spinning fingertips
Across green velvet to rebound
And number the categories of fate
PART III. THE HUMMINGMAN
Birth of the Hummingman

The hemispheres divided
Rocking to a grandiose rhythm
When the hummingman was born
And the gray matter settled
Like molded jello into his skull
Wriggling with capriciousness
Electrically becoming
Left and right brains
Like East and West cultures
In his cellular society
Made by a blind sculptress
Who with sight in her hands
Made cataclysm incarnate
The Hummingman is Wounded

When the voices in his mind were warring
The iridescent hummingman retreated
Darting across the smoky greensward
To the quiet houses that drew no fire
Where children huddled in fear
While their fathers fell for a revolution
For real and noble causes not
For the cause of passion diminishing
And in the low shrubs the hummingman cowered
And watched the conflict rage on
Until the body of his introspection
Lay mutilated by cannon fire
The Hummingman Sees Jesus

The hummingman sees Jesus
On a roadsig near Atlanta
Sees him preaching to Southern Baptists
In a suit and tie
Sees him waving corporate bonds
Over Wall Street hordes
Sees him squatting with a statue
In a Buddhist gown
And sees him going up in smoke
When the votive candles die

So the hummingman with clipped wings
Casts off in a Dodge
To navigate his own course
Down the road
Confusion of the Hummingman

The hummingman pauses
And flits about the cloth flowers
Gracing the table of a wedding feast
And is puzzled by the curious
Odorless treasures
That are like distorted mouths
Detached and sucking from the air
Tiny plankton of emotion
Hummingman in a Cage with Lovebirds

The hummingman once captured
Lived in a cage full of lovebirds
A hardtime hobbling lovebird
A folksung dulcimer lovebird
A greenfused bubble lovebird
A silverglazed pigslime lovebird
A flying smokestack lovebird
A flatbacked treefrog lovebird
And a grimy bumshell lovebird
And there in that slum among aviaries
The hummingman found one love
Two loves
Amnesia
The Hummingman in Space

Across the black ribbon of space
Soars the hummingman
Last dreamer
Casting the holy light of another moon
Seeking the one lost soul
Of the autumn Earth
Last child of the fantastic generation
The Hummingman on the Moon

Obscurity is but one side of the moon
One face turned to the wall
In aversion of the sight of changes
And on that side the hummingman pauses
To savor the fragrant black roses
That create their own atmosphere
In which his ceaselessly beating wings
Cause their familiar buzz
Hummingman with Anchorites

Not far from the place where puppets roam
Beneath the gaze of their emperors
Not far from home or from innocence
The hummingman flits about the caves
Of the anchorites staring down
And searches for nourishment
In the scrubby cliffside brush
While to the anchorites he hums
The song of the ancients
And his music travels the wind
To be heard in some far away steaming jungle
By a reptile rising on hind legs
To hearken to the call of a higher voice
The Reminiscing Hummingman

In the garden the hummingman
Tarries at dusk
Before ebullient blossoms
Considering his age
And the variousness of life
And having savored blooms
Of many flavors
He recalls the pungent flowers
Of Jamaica
And the nectar of bluebells
In the Rockies
And the hummingman flies
On furious unseen wings
While his ruby-throated head
Seems still
Joy of the Hummingman

He has been a blur
And whirring chord
Since childhood humming
From one still life to another
On an unlikely canvas
Like an orbiting quark
He is stable in motion
The hummingman
The embodiment of change
And unlamented alterations
Celebrating nectar
With his seductive songs