I No Longer Hear the Wind

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I No Longer Hear the Wind

By

Robert Tyson Steele

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English Literature and Writing

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ABSTRACT

I No Longer Hear the Wind

by

Robert Tyson Steele, MS Plan B

Utah State University, 2015

I No Longer Hear the Wind is a collection of poetry that explores an unnamed narrator's relationship with nature and civilization. The poems follow this narrator through his fragmented journey of trying to find nature in its most authentic form. As the narrator jumps in and out of civilization, he realizes that he ultimately cannot find nature, even in the most wild of places. Understanding this dilemma, the narrator seeks to connect with society while simultaneously avoiding, resisting, and even undermining civilization, technology, and authority.

The collection draws its influence from nature poets like Rumi, Whitman, Thoreau, and many others and brings their ideas into the problems faced by the 21st century consumer-driven world.

(52 pages)
When I was just a little older than a year, I went on my first snowmobiling trip to my Grandpa’s cabin in the Uinta National Forest. On Christmas day, my family opened presents in the vacant, snow-covered valley beneath Tower Mountain. Being so early in my life, my memory of the experience is unreliable, but I seem to recall looking up through the falling snow at a porcupine grasping the dead, grey branches of a lodgepole pine. This brief image of the porcupine, whether real or contrived, feels like the beginning of my identity, the moment I first gained consciousness. From that point on, the cabin grew to become my sanctuary from civilization—a haven much like Thoreau’s Walden Pond. Here, I could escape the city's engines, traffic lights, and crowds.

However, in recent years, the cabin has changed. Where the cabin once overlooked a valley filled with moose, deer, and field grouse, it now overlooks fences separating properties, winding dirt roads, and racing ATVs. Where the night sky once opened up to an almost solid white Milky Way free of Heber’s light pollution, there are now several bright streetlights dotting the Northern skyline, with occasional car lights pulling around a bend then disappearing like artificial shooting stars. Where I once could listen to the creaking of aspens in the wind or the scratching of raccoons at the cabin door, I am now interrupted by gun-toting neighbors practicing their fast draws and sniper shots. Coping with such change is not easy. The transformation of this valley not only affected the natural beauty of the place, it also deeply affected me.

When it began to alter the very way I saw nature, I started to resent civilization. Even while completely immersed in the woods, I could no longer hear forest sounds the same way. I used to hear the wind rolling through the willows behind the cabin, shaking aspens, bending the
tips of pines before tangling my hair in knots. Yet now, when I listen for the wind, all I hear is a highway. Though there are no highways around the cabin, that’s what I hear. Every time the wind blows, the muscles in my back tense up, and I suddenly feel the stress of civilization, like I’m crouched over a bright screen in a cubicle in some concrete building, the boss hovering over me with a pointed finger, demanding projects to be done. With each gust of wind, I feel every anxiety of the city. I feel the bad employment, corrupt politics, and human cruelty. I resent that I have become so accustomed to the sounds and feelings of the city that I can’t hear the wind as its own element. In my poetry, the speaker tries to cope with this sense of loss, trying to come to terms with what nature has become.

One of the challenges of writing environmental poetry is that it is easy to lament over everything man-made and “unnatural.” When one is looking for peace and solitude in nature, it is easy to criticize pavement, electric lines, and even the presence of other people. But, what right do I have to drive up to my cabin in my loud four-wheel drive vehicle, yet demand silence from the neighbors’ ATVs? What right do I have to light a fire, a candle, or a lantern, yet ask for the city to turn off its lights? What gave my Grandpa the right to build a cabin in the first place? Yet, somehow I have the nerve to say I can’t cope with new fences? As a friend once told me, “An environmentalist is the person who already has a cabin in the woods.” To avoid hypocrisy in my thesis, I have taken a different direction—one that will broaden my readership to more than just a circle of treehuggers and nudists. That oft-repeated theme of “we need to stop destroying nature” is too simple an answer to a very complex problem.

Walt Whitman touched on this dilemma with his famous “barbaric yawp” in his work “Song of Myself.” There seems to be an interesting collision between nature and Whitman when he writes the following lines:
The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Though Whitman celebrates nature with his “barbaric yawp,” is he not also interrupting it? The spotted hawk doesn’t seem too happy with him. While trying to nap by the fire at my cabin, would I be disturbed by Whitman’s sudden yawp? What gives me and Whitman the right to sound our various yawps, yet deny the snowmobiles their chance to zoom through the fresh powder of winter? Are they not also sounding their yawps, just a bit more mechanical and intrusive? The snowmobilers are simply celebrating their version of nature. In my poetry, I try not to neglect the fact that I participate in disturbing nature as much as anyone else. I can’t simply demonize civilization and celebrate nature, because I exist in both worlds. My very involvement in civilization—my dirt pack on roads, the burning of wood for heat, the release of CO2 into the atmosphere—even contributes to nature’s destruction. My poetry is intended to find peace within that paradox.

That said, there is still something that will always irk me about the ever-expanding presence of civilization in nature. But, because I can’t offer an answer without sounding hypocritical, I strive to write poetry that applauds human agency, yet promotes an ethical responsibility to resist destructive powers.

Rather than bemoaning civilization while praising nature, my poetry seeks to construct a new way of thinking about the two. In the art of poetry, all it takes is a well-constructed metaphor for a reader to reconstruct the world. Gloria Anzaldúa once wrote, “The metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness” (91). To me, this means that metaphors are the building
blocks to consciousness, both individually and collectively. Cultures are built on the metaphors and narratives they tell themselves, and my hope is that my poetry will create a new metaphorical mind to build the vessel for a new form of analytical consciousness.

This is where the narrator's tendency to resist civilization comes in. My poetry is intended to make a blueprint for readers to show that resisting authority and other systematic powers, whether for good or for bad, can become an outlet for coping with the loss of nature. For the narrator in my poetry, resistance brings about a sort of catharsis. In my poem “Day Use Only,” the speaker decides to camp at a trailhead parking lot where no overnight camping is allowed. As he has been searching all night for a place to sleep, he decides to stay despite the warning signs. Seeing the old remains of a sheepherder's campsite only makes him angry. In a rebellious moment, he pees on the road next to a trailhead bathroom and contemplates shooting the “Day Use Only” sign with his pistol. The relieving of his bladder represents the relief he feels from rebelling against the sign. It may be disgusting and it may even be against the law, but the narrator does it anyway. In another poem, “Instincts in Walmart,” just the opposite happens: the speaker, so accustomed to peeing in the wilderness, nearly unzips his pants in an aisle in Walmart before he realizes he needs to find a bathroom. In Walmart, the consequences of antisocial behavior would have been much worse than it would have been in the poem “Day Use Only,” so he just gives in to the rules. The juxtaposition of these two poems shows the different ways of navigating the system, showing how the narrator is ultimately immersed in civilization despite his search for nature (in this case, nature being the ability to urinate anywhere without consequence). In the larger framework of my collection, these two poems echo the theme of “I No Longer Hear the Wind,” where nature is no longer accessible to the speaker because of the demands of the system. This is in no way saying the system is bad—after all, without indoor
plumbing and sewage treatment facilities, civilization would be a mess—the poems only point out the collision between nature and civilization, highlighting a confused, rebellious narrator who gets stuck in the middle.

In the narrator’s search for nature, he has no real revelation. In the end, the speaker only discovers that his immersion in civilization has over-ridden every sensory experience he has with nature. Because of this, he not only resents the road signs and Walmart bathrooms, but he starts to question the larger constructions of collectivity that have invented the system—things such as nationalism, religion, political institutions, technology, and surveillance. In my poem “Commercial Alaskan Septic System,” the narrator subtly points out that it is the rich facilitating the destruction of an environment when their money drives a fisherman to pump out a septic system into the ocean. In this poem, the speaker constructs a metaphor that starts to form his desire to resist a system that favors the rich and lets the impoverished working class literally clean up the feces of the rich—a minor but nevertheless necessary point of the collection.

In nature poetry, there are, of course, thousands of years of material to draw upon, making it impossible for me to offer a comprehensive review of the literature. Nature poetry is composed of the ruminations of ancient Chinese hermits, the mysticism of the medieval Sufi poets, and the spirit of the 19th century romantics, to name a few. In some ways, I draw on the long-held traditions of reverence for nature. Rumi is a poet that comes to mind, as he venerates nature to the point that it becomes a spiritual teacher, a metaphor for one’s relationship with God. The theme of water recurs throughout his poetry, and Rumi compares the soul of man to oceans and streams, meant to be flowing and constantly seeking. My poetry often resembles the statement in Rumi’s “Be Lost in the Call,” where the speaker begs his spirit to discover his path: “Spirit, find your way, in seeking lowness like a stream” (64). In this statement, Rumi finds
spiritual guidance in the idea of a stream’s path, the meandering uncertainty that eventually brings one to the ocean. I try to echo this theme in the poem “To Google,” where the speaker finds solace in the wandering arroyos of the desert southwest. And, again, I explore this in the poem, “Parting Branches,” where the speaker feels like he has changed just as much as the stream he used to hike along as a child. The speaker in my poetry believes that in nature one can have the quintessential human experience, but knowing where and how to find nature is another question.

Despite nature being presented as the ideal, my poetry isn’t necessarily about the worship of wild things. On the contrary, it is even irreverent at times. Some of my poetry dwells on the reality that nature seems to be unforgiving more often than it is some beautiful, sublime experience. For example, in my poem, “Another Nude Man in the Woods,” I take the stereotypical nude “lover” of the woods and reverse the adoration of nudity. The speaker sees that being naked in nature is actually difficult and weird. In my poem, the narrator removes his clothes and explains that he does not actually feel “natural,” instead saying:

...all I feel is cold, stiff.

Granite is ice beneath my feet.

Pine needles spear the bottoms of my toes.

I think, a bath in the pond would reduce me to squeals and shivers.

The speaker feels awkward without the comforts of civilization, which shows again that he ultimately fails at finding nature. Except for those rare moments of the sublime, the speaker in these poems feels wrapped up in civilization, even if it is the subtle trigger of wind sounding like a car. There is often no Sufi teaching in nature, as nature itself can’t be perceived with a frame within civilization. So my poetry begs the question: where is that great spiritual teacher?
In general, my poetry is free verse and doesn’t adhere to traditional form, which echoes poet Walt Whitman’s intentional rejection of form. In the introduction to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, Whitman explains that America has the potential to bring a new wave of poetic form to the world by embracing new poetic forms. He explains that poetry, like the United States, can be free from European roots and traditions, and that poetry can be limitless in style and subject. He believes that just as America can harbor many types of people and varieties of landscape, so can poetry be expressed in forms unfamiliar to the European poetry. He writes the following lines prefacing the famous free verses of Leaves of Grass:

The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take the shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form (8).

Here, Whitman is arguing that perfect poems should be present with the “free” growth of poetic rules, not the traditional, constrictive forms. Just as the scent of a fruit has no form, a poem with fruit in its subject ought to reflect that very nature. In my poetry, the formlessness reflects the wide range of feelings the narrator has while stuck between nature and civilization, a mix of wild ravings, sheer awe, and political/structural nausea. My long, breathless lines embody the speaker’s vertigo or excitement, while my dense, musical lines reflect total reverence for the object at hand. Such emotions cannot be constrained by traditional forms.

Another American writer whose ideas about individualism and freedom influence my work is Henry David Thoreau. His resistance to civilization informs my own philosophy, where I advocate a lifestyle that is in direct opposition to the consumer-based world, even if it includes acting out in civil disobedience. I want readers to sense that I’m giving them a call to action, an
invitation to disobey laws and culture that is damaging to individual consciousness. I want readers to adopt a new perspective and to act on that perspective by resisting the comforts of contemporary capitalist society. Over all, I want them to feel that resistance is essential to living life fully. As Thoreau himself puts it, during his famous project of social resistance:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (21)

Just as his experience calls for readers to live life to the fullest, I want the experiences of the narrator in my poetry to exhibit the same sort of heroic carpe-diem attitude. In this way, my poetry supports Thoreau-like hermitages and civil disobedience, but applies it to the grand apparatus of today’s civilization.

Where I slightly differ from Thoreau is that my poetry seeks to more fully recognize the beauty of civilization, even the pollution, noise, and sadness that comes with it. To give my poetry some balance between nature and civilization, I adopt a style similar to the documentary called *The Cruise*. Not quite poetry, but extremely poetic and full of poetic references, the film follows a brief time in the life of Timothy Speed Levitch, a tour guide on a double decker bus in New York City. Immersed in the grip of the nation's biggest city, Levitch reveals the complexities of individuality and spirituality within a system that demands order and compliance. To Levitch, his tour bus is a metaphor for life, how each day is composed of loops,
of repeated habits and vices. To him, it is up to the individual to make the most out of those loops and to find meaning apart from the mold of the “system,” which to Levitch is everything that attempts to oppress, control, or make uniform. In a place that can be overwhelming and lonely, Levitch finds beauty in every architectural curve of New York city. In my own poetry, I try to give civilization some credit, which softens the speaker’s sometimes hypocritical voice.

Levitch’s documentary also informs some of my views on resisting civilization. In one scene, Levitch details a conversation he had with a woman about the “grid plan,” which is New York City’s parallel road lines, matching housing blocks, and endless traffic. He expresses his contempt for the grid plan in the following rant:

The grid plan emanates from our weaknesses. This layout of avenues and streets in New York City. This system of 90 degree angles... To me, the grid plan is puritan. It's homogenizing in a city where there is no homogenization available. There is only total existence, total cacophony, a total flowing of human ethnicities and tribes and beings and gradations of awareness and consciousness.

He is arguing that human experience does not exist in the “functional” world of uniformity. To him, the strictness of the grid plan does not function in harmony with the city’s constant flow of many identities. On the contrary, the grid plan removes individuality and promotes homogenization. In the conversation between Levitch and this woman, the woman says that, “Everyone loves the grid plan,” a comment in which Levitch heavily disagrees. He argues that her statement supports conformity and alienates those with alternative views:

She's really aligning herself with this civilization. It's like saying, ”Oh, I can't imagine altering this civilization. I can't imagine altering this meek and lying morality that rules our lives. I can't imagine standing up on a chair in the middle
of the room and changing perspective. I can't imagine changing my mind on anything. And in the end, I can't imagine having my own identity that contradicts other identities." When she said to me, after my statements, "Everyone likes the grid plan," isn't she automatically excluding myself from "everyone"?

In this tirade against the system, Levitch reveals how collective thinking can estrange those who don’t fit the mold.

In my own poetry, I hope to deconstruct society’s lemming ideologies, the autopilot behaviors, and unconscious belief systems. To do this, I place the narrator in situations that cause him to act out with risky or lawless behavior. In this way, the poetry reveals that collective thinking isn't the only way to answer a problem. In my poem “Shooting My Dog,” the narrator is forced to shoot and bury his sick dog while camping in the mountains. Common sense would suggest that the dog should be euthanized by a vet and the body removed according to certain regulations and health standards. However, the speaker’s circumstances make it so that it is not reasonable to follow the rulebook. The shooting and burial is brutal and raw, but this speaker’s resistance to the system makes his expression of love for the dog all the more beautiful. This poem shows that for this particular circumstance, the setting for a funeral is far more intimate than it would be at the euthanasia table. And, once again, because the setting takes places in the natural world, this poem circles back to the importance of the pursuit of nature, how nature itself (the death of the dog) can generate an experience that defies civilization.

Despite my recognition of civilization’s beauty, my poetry still maintains a sometimes harsh voice when it calls for it. In all its harshness, though, my speaker tries to maintain a healthy criticism of society’s ills. One author that influences my poetry’s tone is the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In his book America, Baudrillard argues that much of American
consumerism is shallow, meaningless, and pointless. He picks apart the narratives of American media, religion, and government, arguing that American culture is detached from history and removed from nature. He believes that behavior like jogging, driving, and even sex in America is not an individual act but a sort of mindless collectivity, a myth of progression and freedom. He claims that the freeways are a prime example of American collectivity, a “spectacle” of “automation.” He writes that “[freeways] are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move” (55). He notes that Los Angeles appears to “have been built around the arterial network” (57), ultimately concluding that “it is the same with American Reality.” He is essentially saying that American behavior is driven by a propulsion to move forward as a collective, leaving consequence or individuality in the rear-view. In my poem entitled “American Interstate System,” a rant about freeway traffic, Baudrillard’s influence is most apparent. I point out how everyone’s desire to speed is useless, unimpressive, and mindless. The poem’s speaker believes that injuries and death on the freeway are a result of this mindlessness, a logic that he believes to be a burden on America. Baudrillard’s themes on American simulacrum also inform my collection, as most evident in the poems “BLM Monument” and “Tour Bus Scenic Stop.” In these poems, the speaker ultimately questions what is real about nature and what is not, leaving the speaker wondering whether nature is truly accessible.

As I address nature and civilization, individuality and collectivity, I try to expose what happens to those who exist within the collective propulsions of not only the American freeways, but of all humanity’s systems. I argue that collective thinking unknowingly produces fallout within itself, and the system devours those who can’t operate in its sphere. To me, the most influential author in this arena is Pablo Neruda. Much of Neruda’s poetry beautifully uncovers the systematic powers that oppress both environment and people. He discusses how governments
and corporations can destroy people, but, what gives his poetry the most power is that he uses simple language to paint a picture of the destruction. He needs no call to action other than what he says in his poem, “I Explain a Few Things”:

Come and see the blood on the streets,

come and see

the blood on the streets,

come and see the blood

on the streets. (33)

I try to make my poetry ring in a similar way. In the poem, “Motion Sensor,” I write about a Vietnam vet who battles PTSD and develops a strange cancer from herbicide exposure during the war. The vet eventually kills himself, the result of the character’s inability to overcome callous collective powers. My collection is designed to reveal the violence, pain, and discomfort inherent in society’s embrace of collective propulsions.

The more society removes itself from nature, the more damage society inflicts on nature. Agrarian poet and essayist Wendell Berry believes that we destroy nature through our individual participation in consumer culture. As an individual depends on a wasteful institution for his or her survival, that person perpetuates nature’s destruction. He writes,

Nearly every one of us, nearly every day of his life, is contributing directly to the ruin of this planet.... We have delegated all our vital functions and responsibilities to salesmen and agents and bureau and experts of all sorts. We cannot feed or cloth ourselves, or entertain ourselves, or communicate with each other, or be charitable or neighborly or loving, or even respect ourselves, without recourse to a
merchant or a corporation or a public-service organization or an agency of the government or a style-setter or an expert. (83-84)

Berry’s remedy for this environmental crisis is simple yet profound. In his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," the speaker suggests that in order to combat violent and oppressive powers, an individual must do something that said powers cannot predict. He suggests planting sequoias, listening to carrion, or loving “someone who does not deserve it.”

As soon as the generals and the politicos can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction. (12)

In this fashion, Berry creates a resistance to what Baudrillard might call “collective propulsions.” Both Berry and Baudrillard might say the government constructs highways because no one wakes up out of the spectacle—no one wakes up out of the trap of consumption. Berry’s counter to environmental destruction is a theme I try to weave in my poems. In the poem, “Winter on Lake Winnipeg,” the speaker ends with a proclamation to not just agree with the forecaster’s opinion on the weather, but to pay attention to the beauty, to recognize that even high Arctic sub-zero storms are stunning. By refusing to demonize nature, the active anti-collective individual protects it, sees it for its value beyond mining, drilling, or paving.

Over all, my poetry is intended to feel elliptical in direction and even absurd at times. In opposition to my poetry’s call for resistance, the narrator ultimately has no real answer—only a
plea for readers to seek awareness. Too often, political discourse in literature alludes to the idea that there is some big, bad person at the top of the system. Because people will generally latch onto someone to blame, they accept this discourse. You can see this in the themes of today’s popular dystopian stories like *Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, where a singular political leader or faction orchestrates evil plans, oppresses people, and destroys individuality and nature. Though there are often real faces to the problem, like far-away tyrants, criminal organizations, corrupt leaders, heartless bankers, and greedy Wall Street traders, my poetry makes it clear that there really is no culprit to the destruction. There is no one in charge—no table of shady people saying, “how can we oppress?” In the end, the system is made up of people who have compromised their own individuality, both as leaders and followers. There is no Hitler without the soldier. There are no paved roads without drivers of cars. There is no Google without the user. To make this point in my poetry, I adopt the tone of the narrator in John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. The novel takes place in the Dust Bowl of the 1930s during a time when farmers were being removed from their land. One particular chapter encapsulates what the people must have felt when their properties foreclosed. The passage shows a land owner kicking out a tenant of the land. The tenant, believing that being born on the land gives him the right to stay, argues with the owner. The owner insists that the man leave the farm, responding with the following lines:

We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man...The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you.

It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it... The monster isn't men, but it can make men do what it wants. (33-34)
Following this conversation, the tenant then threatens to shoot the owner, the bankers, or the government official who pushed the directive. In the end, though, there is no one to shoot that will make a difference. The tenant asks about the chain of command issuing the order, “But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don't aim to starve to death before I kill the man that's starving me” (38). Despite his anger, the tenant is forced to give up and goes on to watch the tractor that replaced him, unable to understand why he could do nothing. It is no single human being, but it is the collective machine that devours his family.

This tenant farmer's lost rage is similar to the anger of the narrator in my poetry. My poetry's resistance to the collective is mostly aimless and there is no real end-goal in mind. In my poetry, I try to instill in the reader an ethical model of existence that calls for awareness and defiance. This resistance isn't necessarily about shooting someone up top, but rather, it is about systematically rebelling against the components of the collective that remove individuality and destroy nature. It's about gaining a consciousness through pursuing nature, whether that is uncomfortably stripping down in the woods, repulsively peeing on the streets, or illegally burying a dog up in the mountains. Such acts of defiance may or may not actually influence the system in the end, but that is not the point. The point is to remove one’s self from the gears of the machine as much as possible, to discover that on the fringes of the system’s moving parts, nature reveals the futility of the collective’s destructive impetus.
Works Cited


