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Portrait of Rich County

Adrian Thomson
Utah State University

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ABSTRACT

Portrait of Rich County

by

Adrian Thomson, Graduate Student

Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Benjamin Gunsberg
Department: English

*Portrait of Rich County* presents the small town of Randolph, Utah in poems describing its wildlife, recreational activities, and the perspectives of citizens in the contemporary rocky mountain west. Special attention to the imagination of the poems’ speaker toward the more dreamlike qualities of Rich County establishes itself throughout, in order to convey a feeling of hope within harsh terrain. This collection examines the theme of salvaging items not often considered, such as rusted junk, ancient houses, or roadside garbage, both in the actions of the speaker and through the act of naming these items upon the page. An over-arching theme, the ever present threat of death in isolation, contrasts the danger, remoteness and shocking weather of Rich County with its moments of beauty, sublimity and respite. In effect, a wider portrait is painted of the whole.

(101 pages)
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Adrian Thomson
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INTRODUCTION

When I began this project in the summer before my graduate program, I felt certain of my understanding of poetry. I became convinced into the medium through the calm, focused subjects on which poetry concentrates—flowers, colors, birds. I stayed because of the unhurried, humility-driven creative processes evident in the visiting poets I met, dissimilar to the egoism I had encountered in fiction seminars. I first focused on reading and later writing nature poetry, and for this reason saw the genre as one focused upon presence. I saw the best subjects for poems as animals or occurrences experienced or sighted within nature, and written down that moment, while the handful of reactionary stanzas my mind formed were still fresh. On nature walks, I heard a quail whiffle above the trail, watched a bat dip down at dusk into water to drink, met a deer with fawns in the snow of a hill. I thought that reactions to nature stimuli would be enough, self-sufficient and pre-destined to have their own themes. In the process of my thesis I have learned that this does not work—that poetry should be a mix of reaction alongside thorough contemplation in revision. A larger point must be reached, through direct and declarative language. Small details can be changed, or added. Lines cannot drone on. The objective truth of a remembered occurrence does not matter. The poem must become a snippet of realistic beauty, paired with others in a grouping of similar reflections.

Such snippets make up my collection *Portrait of Rich County*, concerning the natural world of my hometown in Randolph, Utah. Like many small western ranching towns of less than five hundred people, the unbelievably harsh weather, remoteness, barrenness, and overall rugged demeanor may be off-putting, overbearing and downright miserable—even to the people who live there. These poems seek to find the beauty that
exists in Randolph, alongside the threat of detachment and death. It does so through a focus on the landscape, wildlife, and enriching activities, as well as an escape into the imagination.

Such an approach is not new—in his examination of William Wordsworth, Victorian scholar Daniel S. Burt attests that the poet spoke “in ordinary language of commonplace things. Forsaking grandeur” was but one of his choices in craft (124). To “create interest in the essential qualities of the human experience,” Wordsworth describes emotions shared by all humankind, which relate directly to his readers (124). Burt describes the poet’s descriptive imagery, also consisting of the widely familiar: “Wordsworth combines intense introspection with a vivid descriptive power enriched by regional details, achieving a depth and truthfulness” in his vision of the world (124). I hope to accomplish this with Portrait of Rich County, but what separates my approach are the “regional details” of Rich County themselves: the blue sky and clouds, the dark mountain, the turkey vultures overhead. These represent a specific view of Utah’s Rocky Mountain West, and provide a window into contemporary regional viewpoints and experiences.

I knew, however, that the collection could not capture Randolph how it is, but instead showcase Randolph as I see it myself. Throughout this collection, I draw from momentary visions of a fantasy world I call “the Spellominal” to show the beauty of Rich County I see at its fringes, the promise of something better horizoned in the far distance, above frozen sagebrush desert. “Wordsworth realized that the power of the imagination could transform dull perception and redeem experience . . . opening up the full range of
human experience to enlighten and save an otherwise impoverished and barren world”

(125). With this collection, I hope to showcase these principles.

All items spoken of within these poems are real.

INFLUENCES

Among the poets I consulted for this project, most are nature poets, and a great deal are poets who move within nature to name the things that they find there, or discover something about themselves. Few capture the feeling of peace within nature as does William Stafford, in “How to Regain Your Soul:”

Come down Canyon Creek trail on a summer afternoon
that one place where the valley floor opens out.
You will see
the white butterflies. Because of the way
shadows
come off those vertical rocks in the west, there are
shafts of sunlight hitting the river and a deep
long purple gorge straight ahead. Put down your pack. (31)

While reading Stafford on-site, in the hammock discussed in my poem “Three Trees Below the Mountain,” I felt moved to describe the similarly positioned “valley floor” casting “shadows [of] vertical rocks” I could see above me. I replicated the feeling Stafford’s poem elicits:

Further up on the face, parabola-shaped sections
of white rock that are missing leave unscalable ceilings
in half circles of slate.

... green clefts of trees in the rough,
and one lord of trees among them
beside an obelisk of rock

in a high grassy grove
to which I will never venture.

Here are your instructions:
lay lengthwise

on a bone-white log. Look up,
at a cathedral of stone.

The “instructions” are an address to the reader on finding peace within nature, which reflects the “How to” approach of Stafford’s title. The use of “cathedral” in the final line displays the act as one of reverence.

David Gitin’s poetry focuses largely on pairing images of nature with one another. While some poets might describe their subject in comparison to the physical items surrounding it, Gitin opts for describing the physical strongly contrasted with the metaphysical, as in the poems “what do we see” and “OCEAN:”

deer
  mingle with light

  shadows
  among the ponderosas (22)

bones of dead fish. the year
ends. blast of light. (20)

Against the description “deer,” Gitin’s choice of “light / shadows” offsets the reader’s expectations, leaving them with a dream-like feeling. Physical “bones of dead fish” contrasted with the human construct of time (“the year / ends”) leaves a similar impression. The reader feels jolted by the “blast of light” afterwards. Gitin speaks of metaphysical properties of light again in “DREAMTRACK:”

two horses
chew the sun
bleached grass

and lope
volumes of air away

from each other (15)

The powerful break between “chew the sun / bleached grass” again conjures a dream-like temperament, bolstered by the “volumes of air” moving as the horses move. Gitin’s minimalist style had a tremendous influence on my collection in general, particularly on the haiku that cover its pages. I took direct inspiration from “DREAMTRACK” in the following haiku, originally titled “Observances:”

Bone-masked horse bites dust.
Two perfect circles in
branches of leaves. God.

I picture Gitin’s inspiration for his poems as small moments of observing, then later describing things seen while out and about, and formed this haiku in a similar fashion, writing of the items I encountered on a single August day. The movement of the horse in its pen to the north of town echoes Gitin’s horses “chewing sun,” while the circles in the leaves above my yard form negative space. At the end, I again move to the reverential, the glory of observing the day.

A poet that astounds me at every turn she makes is Mary Oliver, whose conversational poems observe and praise the world at large. In her self-referential piece, “Messenger” she states:

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand. (1)
In her quiet acts of reverence to the earth, she probes “deep in the speckled sand,” and follows closely the darting “hummingbird,” the “quickening yeast.” Her mention of “blue plums” and “clam” suggests coolness, as well as unhurried calm. For this is her purpose, so states “Messenger:”

which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture. (1)

Here Oliver places emphasis on beautiful minutia, “the phoebe, the delphinium,” and even something as everyday as “sheep,” covering each aspect of life. But she even goes a step further, giving space to “the pasture,” and so equalizes the importance of all things in the piece. In the titular poem of my collection, I offer my own appraisal of:

the things that remain in the world of Rich County, beautiful on their own

white fossil shells along trails in the forest
lights on the mountain blinking far-distant factories

the rodeo stench of pigs sleeping in sawdust
a bloated calf floating in two feet of water

an egg-shaped stone found inside a dead elk
lemon-colored moths in the Post Office lobby

Like Oliver, I reveal small elements of beauty— “lemon-colored moths,” “white fossil shells,” “pigs sleeping in sawdust.” I also establish contrast through less inviting images, such as “bloated calf floating” and “dead elk.” My attention to these somber bodies is less hopeful than Oliver’s “pasture,” but I include them to show the reality of life in my small town, the toxic sublime that exists in the frozen wastes of Rich County.

A poet I began reading late into the project who served as a major influence, Ross Gay, imbues a charismatic joyousness to his work that is hard to fathom. Moreover, his
stylistic choice to include two-line stanzas that move through long, ever-changing sentences of enchanting images, as in “Spoon,” influenced several poems of my collection:

Who sits like this on the kitchen floor
at two in the morning turning over and over

the small silent body in his hands
with his eyes closed fingering the ornate
tendrils of ivy cast delicately into the spoon
that came home with me eight months ago

from a potluck next door during which
the birthday boy so lush on smoke (Gay 33)

Movement in this sequence is paused within the white space, which acts as a comma for the ideas and imagery embedded in the lines. The line endings “over and over” and “eight months ago” suggest direct movement, while “ornate” and “smoke” serve as arresting images to finish the line. The image of the spoon is one I also came in contact with during my work on the collection, which prompted me to include it within my titular poem, relaying in its following section a language similar to Gay’s:

My family and I wake to see the dark mountain undulating repeatedly beyond our arched gate

the morning walk to the Post Office a sense of fulfillment and wreak a positive kind of havoc in bold afternoon

on objects we find on the ground in our county owned and still owned by the people who first staked out the cold, walked the plains, hid from wind beneath ridges of rock or built log and nail homesteads now rubbed smooth by cows . . .

It’s here, examining the handle of an intricate spoon grip-polished leaves in milky silver that I conjure up images
of stately grey and green banquet halls, elysian puddings under glass
grand chryselephantine hallways in a castle of light

The near-lack of punctuation, and the verbs “staked,” and “ached [gate]” provide a sense
of movement in the line endings that reflects Gay’s broad style, while “bold afternoon”
and “rubbed smooth by cows” provide places to linger. The mention of my own “intricate
spoon” details a movement into “the Spellominal,” as depicted by the “castle of light,”
which occurs in a majority of the collection’s pieces. Describing this specific jump into
my imagination shows this theme and understanding of my process, communicated
through Gay’s bold directness.

May Swenson’s poetry had a major influence on the poems in this collection. She
describes the natural world and the “human” world as one and the same, though it is
perceived to be separated. She describes interactions between human and animal life as a
way of crossing this gap of understanding. In “Unconscious Came a Beauty,” Swenson
places a butterfly on the wrist of her speaker by forming the butterfly directly upon the
page:

Unconscious
came a beauty to my
wrist
and stopped my pencil,
merged its shadow profile with
my hand’s ghost
on the page:
Red Spotted Purple or else Mourning
Cloak,
paired thin-as-paper-wings, near black,
were edged on the seam side poppy orange,
as were its spots.

I sat arrested, for its soot-haired
body’s worm
shone in the sun.
It bent its tongue long as
a leg
black on my skin
and clung without my feeling,
while its tomb-stained
duplicate parts of
a window opened.
And then I moved. (327)

The speaker is stunned by the interaction, as she describes how her visitor “stopped my pencil” as “I sat arrested:” this is a fragile and confounding moment. In the same frame of emotion and exciting vein of a shape poem, I recreated a similar icon detailing my interaction with “A Bee,” the first half of which is replicated below. My verse does not match Swenson’s, but the idea of an interaction toward deeper understanding remains:

*A Bee*

sleeps soundly
in a flower of the fox glove
growing out back in the bed of grey-blue stone. When I bend down she turns around and wiggles deeper into its trumpet.

On our third night of freezing June rain
Mom asks me to cover our plants
with the small plastic buckets (for the shorter red daisies
not yet bloomed) and the larger grey plastic trash can for the tall pale foxglove. I set four big stones around its base so that she can go in and out. When I set it over her she slips out under the base, buzzing round and round the can, looping a tantrum along the walk and through each of my legs. At last I lift it off. She crawls back in. I go inside, and yell with Mom . . .
The shape of this poem shows an overhead view of the bee, teardrop wings above and below, broad abdomen to left and squared head at right. The interaction of my speaker is unemotional toward the bee, reflecting the unsureness of Swenson’s. On the whole, Swenson has taught me the necessity of finding minute elements of beauty, and how the humane dimension of the poem must move to respond. The vast majority of descriptive language in my bird haiku owe a tremendous debt to Swenson.

Briefly, I consulted Rob Carney’s “88 Maps,” the titular poem of his collection of the same name, and discovered his talent for striking imagery. Carney relays curious charts made by the former tenant of his house:

In one he’s mapped the yard’s topography,
detailing valleys and elevations:

the small concavity above his cat’s bones
where loosened dirt

sunk slowly in the rain,
the spire of the mailbox,

each scattered rock in the flower garden.
And somehow the scent of the peach tree. Above that,

each jut of the roof line. And higher still,
his back-porch view of the craters on the moon. (Carney 2)

From “cat’s bones” to “the scent of the peach tree,” Carney moves impressively to “the craters on the moon,” displaying a knowledge of where such bold images must be placed, and how many, to each serve an impact. I portray a similar imagistic view in my poem “Maps of the Mind,” which describes two sea monsters I imagine in my valley:

and out on the cerulean surface if I look, I can see
the goose-shaped
fish described by Thevet and de Jode,
the Aloes, a scaly green thing with long neck
and no wings, four fins bottomed out, 
the tail of a trout and a quizzical expression, 
the growth on the top of its head shaped like a pear.

... 

A map illustration from Endersch of a dark purple right whale swimming in transparent squiggly lines across the valley, fat tweezers tail flipped above bending body, a calcified patch of barnacles on its nose, its round, elephant-kind eye, its giant comb toothed smile.

... 

And as I look over the county wide, 
I can see the places I will be soon: here the river Bravaghul, there the mountains of the moon.

The similarity in topic of my piece with Carney’s, as well as the pairing of “peach” and “pear,” reveals an affinity for the imagistic style of his poems. I too often pour over atlases, from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, particularly for the sea monsters, of which the Aloes and Endersch’s whale are but two very minor examples. I end my piece similar to Carney, with the evocative noun “moon,” but in my case with the fictitious river and mountains of Africa, first thought by Ptolemy to be the source of the Nile.

The poems of Richard Hugo, which display both concentrated imagery and an association with the western united states, have helped me in describing my own layered neighborhoods. Many of the poems in my collection are “directional,” in that they say precisely where items are situated among Randolph and around the valley. This may cause trouble for the reader in picturing this movement, but in some instances, I have taken away certain indicators (the, and, of, and prepositions) to help with this. Hugo is very directional in his descriptions of place, such as in “West Marginal Way:”
One tug pounds to haul an afternoon
of logs up river. The shade
of Pigeon Hill across the bulges
in the concrete crawls on reeds
in a short field, cools a pier
and the violence of young men
after cod. The crackpot chapel,
with a sign eased by rain, returned
before to calm and a mossed roof. (Hugo 5)

I am fascinated by the action of “the shade” in the second stanza “cool[ing] a pier” all the way down in the fifth. This shows extreme concentration in relaying a lengthy series of placements, with a sense of what occurs within. I describe how, in my poem “Idiosyncrasies:”

There’s an empty lot of land beneath the cemetery hill
in sagebrush and shade of three deer-gathered trees
and an abandoned mint-colored house by the bank,

in the front window of which a pale vine is growing,
and a cobalt shed by the school locked when Dad was a boy.

Mentioning “deer-gathered” in relation to the trees and the “pale vine” of the window shows how each item is utilized, and “when Dad was a boy” serves as a signifier of time. I relate to Richard Hugo in terms of his devotion to the rural west, despite its crippling isolation. In his introduction to the posthumous collected works of Hugo, western writer William Kittredge describes how his friend “loved the singing distances and the dreams of people who inhabit them,” which I see as evoking a similar feeling of hope as my own view of the horizons north of town, “glowing like a plush fish colored rainbow pastel” (Hugo xxxii). This instance, from my “A View to the Spellominal,” and others I believe show my optimism about living in the west.
In the final work I studied, William Carlos Williams’ *Spring and All*, I found many correlations on where my own imagination is drawn. Its introduction by C. D. Wright reveals an association with cast-off things. Wright paints Williams’ reader as “fetched up “by the road to the contagious hospital”–only then would the first glimpse of grass and “the stiff curl of the wildcarrot leaf” be permitted–at the precise point at which every stick in the refuse emerged particular,” the moment Williams’ reader receives a vision of the whole (Williams, ix-x). This whole includes the splendorous elements of Williams’ natural world, as well as (or contrasted to) the offal of the ditches and wastes, “every stick in the refuse,” which Williams describes in just as much detail. I emulate this concept in an untitled haiku:

A pile of twine, stacked up on refuse,  
is imbued with colorful hues—greens,  
yellows, blues—and beautiful.

Despite the synthetic nature of the twine, its environmental danger and status as “refuse,” I celebrate it as a worthy element of Rich County. By doing this I refuse a reduced view of beauty, and produce an image of the whole. The twine will remain where it is now for a long time—to disregard its presence would be to reject what currently exists, which must not happen, I believe, before anyone attempts to undo any human destruction to the natural world. In the poems of this collection that discuss garbage and other unpleasant human elements, I describe things how they are, not as they should be. My declaration of the twine as “beautiful” leans toward optimism, and seeing the good whenever possible among isolation and destruction. Reacting in sadness, I believe, would only remind the reader of what they already know—garbage is bad—and evoke sadness in them. It would not cause them to see the garbage of their own neighborhoods in a different light, or as
something to be improved. Sadness does not elicit action. Wright mentions, again, Williams’ idea of inclusion, how he “adjusted his focal length to light up cast off, common things; dug his heels into American dirt and passed directly into the moment” (xii). Garbage, a now prevalent “cast off, common thing,” must have the potential to be described in contemporary “American dirt,” as it is more pressing an issue than ever before. I place it on the pages of this collection, within reality, but also often turn to my creative mind. In *Spring*, Williams recognizes in the clear sky one’s imagination, a central theme of my collection:

So long as the sky is recognized as an asso–
ciation

is recognized in its function of accessory to vague words whose meaning it is impossible to rediscover . . .

The farmer and the fisherman who read their own lives there have a practical corrective for —

they rediscover or replace demoded meanings to the religious terms

Among them, without expansion of imagination, there is the residual contact between life and the imagination which is essential to freedom

The man of imagination who turns to art for release and fulfillment of his baby promises contends with the sky through layers of demoded words and shapes . . . because meanings have been lost through laziness or changes in the form of existence [sic] which have let words empty.

Bare handed the man contends with the sky, without experience of existence seeking to invent and design. (19-20)

In the several “Spellominal” poems in my collection, and countless other places, I too utilize the blue sky as “an asso– / ciation,” noted by Williams in the meaningful line
break, “of [an] accessory to vague / words whose meaning[s are] impossible,” often
turning to the sky when I am unsure of what I mean, or to portray this feeling of
unsureness, as in “Personal Pledge:”

I shall find my questions unanswerable
by teddy blue sky
and lean against a pine tree, look up
to find my answers there.

I speak within the rural climes and mindsets of “the farmer and the fisherman,” of which
I am a part, and often “replace demoded meanings to / the religious terms,” turning to the
reverential when describing abstract significance, including the keyword “heaven” within
“Vision in Early Morning:”

loses itself partly in white ceiling and grey
heating grate as light reaches upwards as if
into a heaven above a castle upon clouds,
rising shafts of light ascending . . .

The poems in my collection embrace the “contact between life and the / imagination
which is essential to freedom” through the need of turning to the imagination for a more
optimistic view of Randolph. I see Williams’ “freedom” representing this view, and “the
man of imagination[’s] fulfillment of his baby promises” as the formation of an artistic
mindset at an early age, finally contended years later by the creation of art. I see this in
“the Spellominal” specifically, which has been for me a creative place where my mind
has gone for the majority of my life, to combat the boredom I often encounter in
Randolph. The skies above town serve as a blank slate for my own imagination, but I
hope the optimistic lens of these poems will provide a way for others of my county and
beyond to also cope in the face of isolation. In this collection I “contend [in] the sky [with
my] layers of demoded words and / shapes . . . Bare handed,” and as of yet “without
experience of existence” clouding my mind, as my titular poem portrays in its repetition of “sky;”

reflecting open sky lid
clouds queuing in rows
against a sky of muddy blues
long white corridors
to a fantasy world of the mind.

Through the creation of these poems, however, their in-depth look at the world of Rich County, I can say I have “experience[d an] existence” these last two years within poetry.

NOTE ON HAIKU

Throughout the collection appear bunches of the Japanese poetic form haiku, describing birds, minutia, and observances of subjects, tied sometimes to subjects of the longer poems. I debated for some time whether or not to stay with the five-seven-five syllable rule of haiku, as it is sometimes assumed to follow in English. I ultimately decided against it, and while some haiku display five-seven-five, the majority are made either more direct or more descriptive. The restriction of syllabic space is noted as a natural deterrent by American-Japanese historian Donald Keene, who in describing the early form waka relates how “a poem in thirty-one syllables can be exquisite, it can be moving, but it obviously can never be a full exposition of a poet’s thoughts or attempt to deal with [their] subjects” (16). Haiku, only seventeen syllables, is thus shown to be more than half as constrictive. The definition of haiku as well appears vague to Keene: “People have attempted to divine the meanings intended by [modern-era Japanese] poets, but it remains a real question whether any such short poetic utterances can be called haiku. Liberation may sometimes be too complete” (21).
Hiroaki Sato mentions a historical decline in interest, of “the five-seven-five-syllable haiku (called hokku until about 1990)” replaced by “a rapid acceptance of free verse. One outcome was a total disregard for syllabic count among some haiku poets” (38). It is based upon this “disregard” that I have reworked my brief haiku to represent what each needs to specifically describe. Sato amends by saying, “the acceptance of free verse did not mean the automatic abandonment of traditional forms,” though “free verse confronted [early] poets, as it still does, with the question of what exactly constitutes a poem” (41). In regard to haiku that appear in Portrait of Rich County, I see them as birds themselves, hiding throughout, flying across each page. I encourage you to encounter them, when they appear, as you might a bird, stopping for a moment to acknowledge their brief presence.
REFERENCES


