

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

B. Neal Kirchner for the Master of Arts
(name of student) (degree)

in English presented on May 13, 1992
(major) (date)

Title: The White Field

Abstract approved: 

All art is religious in that it attempts to draw connections between seen and unseen, known and unknown worlds. In my view, religion is a kind of suspicion; the sum of our suspicions that perhaps what we see is not all there is. By extension, poetic aesthetics can also be so described. One suspects that, if words can express the ineffable, perhaps the craft of creating that expression is best guided by some set of prescribed rules or learned techniques. The artist's choice ought not be arbitrary, but made according to the relative persuasiveness of the rule or technique in question.

My desire to write poetry springs in part from my belief that writing is an act which helps one to awaken from the unconsciousness into which we are all born. I believe that facility in language is a producer of consciousness; I

believe that the study of poetry is a producer of that facility. Like I. A. Richards, I believe that words are "the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavor to order itself." Believing that writing is an intensely conscious act, I am continually trying to focus my consciousness and shake myself out of sleep; my poetry is the occasion and the means of that growth.

THE WHITE FIELD

A thesis

Presented to

The Division of English

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

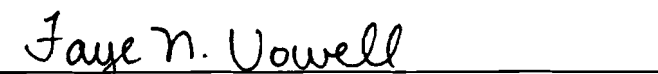
Master of Arts

by

B. Neal Kirchner

May 1992


Approved for the Major Division


Approved for the Graduate Council

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my deepest thanks to Mr. Keith Denniston, my first true creative writing teacher, for getting me involved with writing in spite of myself. I would also like to thank Christopher Howell, whose editorship and guidance will be appreciated for years to come. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Dr. and Mrs. L. D. Kirchner, for their love, guidance, and support, and thank my closest friends for taking me fishing.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
THE CAVE	4
THE SHADOW IN THE LAKE	15
THE WHITE FIELD	28

Poetic Aesthetics

"Though it is right for the imagination to come to support weakness of vision, it must be immediate and direct like the gaze that kindles it."

--Italo Calvino

From Mr. Palomar

All art, as I see it, is religious in that it attempts to draw connections between seen and unseen, known and unknown worlds. In my view, religion is a kind of suspicion; the sum of our suspicions that perhaps what we see is not all there is. By extension, poetic aesthetics can also be so described. One suspects that, if words can express the ineffable, perhaps the craft of creating that expression is best guided by some set of prescribed rules or learned techniques. The artist's choice ought not be arbitrary, but made according to the relative persuasiveness of the rule or technique in question.

The most valuable technique I have thus far learned has been the use of the concrete image; it has afforded me a kind of directness I admire, and has helped soothe my usual woes during editing. If a line doesn't seem to be working, I attempt to simplify things by removing all that is not concrete or connected to the concrete.

In the spirit of the discipline, I tend to avoid certain verb forms, preferring always the immediate and the active. I tend to avoid gerunds as weak verbs; I try to find verbs which require no compounding or auxiliaries. I try to avoid "sound" words; I believe there is onomatopoeia enough in the English language without substituting clangs and buzzes for words. There is the low wind of o and w; the fast crack of t and k.

I picked up some advice from Pound regarding rhythm. The gist of it was that rhythm in a poem ought not be a device or tool, but rather an integral part of the poem, so that form becomes content.

I prefer poems which make use of character, although not every poem I write depends upon character. I try to have a story in mind for every poem, and do my best to present real conflict with some sort of answering resolution.

My desire to write poetry springs in part from my belief that writing is an act which helps one to awaken from the unconsciousness into which we are all born. I believe that facility in language is a producer of consciousness; I believe that the study of poetry is a producer of that facility. Like I. A. Richards, I believe that words are "the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavor to order itself." Believing that writing is an intensely conscious act, I am continually

trying to focus my consciousness and shake myself out of sleep; my poetry is the occasion and the means of that growth.

THE CAVE

Moths

The loud ones hover over bottles, mirrors,
and walls and take the silence
of their names for text
and look for you
on your dark plain,
gaslamp angels tapping at the glass.

If your clothes are fine, if each night
these angels wear tomorrow's suit
and dance the wrinkles out, you may
put them on unknowing, like a
blessing.

Head of a pin on which all angels
frolic, the graceless sun's mirage,
optical jig--these are not moths
quietly dying on the sill.

From Words You Once Said in Your Sleep

Limpid drains cross a sky of slate,
One February day down. Even words
Oppress us now; even the lark
Is crass.

Plato had us wrong: We are not shadows
But scars on a phantom appendage.
Healing, we tap like treelimb
Grazing at our windows. Let us in
We demand, into the perfect,
Blissful cave. But no cave, no roots
Resist the rain, and light stuns us
Where we lie, gazing skyward again.

Palimpsest

In the night window I see
myself into wind and thickets

of texture, a man knitting
his own skeleton. In that framed world

I dim the lights,
my image balances til I am woven,

framed, transparent
as the haze that

hides the moon.

Years Before Divorce

Snow falls on shovel and
Gloved hands; in a window she is
Smiling at him still; Winter's brittle
Scenery scrapes against itself. Is he
Smiling back for her? Ice-covered Maples
Crack like teeth in a press; she is
Smiling in him still.

He is smiling back for her:
Wipe the grin off Winter's face; forge a path
For her, he thinks. Wind bites spur him on.
She is gone from window; now her smiles
Have gone, and he's still out
Moving the Winter around.

Lack of Leda

He feels himself inside
The swan. Indeterminate halves
Collide--pudding and water:
One a promise of the other,
Promise of sweet, sticky completion;
He collapses, floats
Above the cluttered bedroom,
Half-notices dust-covered shelves and books
And thinks his other half
Must appreciate this;
A specious darkness holds him
Close to all he does not touch.

This bird, this essence preens
In thunder. Furious, bolts fling
Shudders, gushing loveliness as wings
Beat inside and all about him, and,
For a moment, his schism is his triumph
Inside the swan.

Secant Street Scene

A man stares at a dark stop sign,
Calling out the letters, doused
With kerosene. His gaze could set
That sign on fire.
Does he seek direction
Here? What magical geometry
Informs his ways? What clues
Lie in this street's array of homes?
He sits still, enthralled, staring,
Until houselights come on nearby
And he turns, his face alight.

Three Fishing Trips with Grandpa

I.

Grandpa sits on river's edge,
Whistling through his teeth. The bank
Erupts with evening.
One instant's turn brings pole's neat
Arc to water. Welcome, catfish. Grandpa,
Look!

II.

Grandpa's basspond, Grandpa's boat holds
Two. We're whistling to the shore
For luck. Must be a million black bass
Underneath. Grandpa, can I , May I try
A beer? The afternoon
Frays out from there.

III.

I wish we never had to go. This
Reservoir is full of fish! Did you see
This morning's catch set free? Don't say
A thing; I know you're
There, I hear you
Whistling.

The Sound of Blades Melting Into the Air

They roll, like drops of blood
To the tongue. Like twigs
In memory's thicket, each thirsts
After the Perfect Middle, makes
Love to secret breeze,
Folds quietly into the soft,
Low air.

A Little Bird

I used to ask the birds for messages
From you, so strong was my belief
In Mother, to whom birds
Brought messages without end. I stood
In a pasture looking up, palms
Outstretched, wanting a sign, any
Sign, so long as you would be its meaning.

I glimpsed then the pallid sky blue that,
In later years, would own me: The
Solid reality of absence, the empty drum
The heart can be. Palms up, face up, I
Raved for birds to come and take my absence
From me.

And if I cursed when birds
Remained obscure,
If I ripped a seam while crossing
The barbed-wire fence behind the barn,
Without fail, my Mother would know.
A little bird would always, always
Tell her.

Formal Adversary

When this evening's murmur crumbles into night,
When our lips have juggled chunks of spiny verse
Will you come to me? My darling sparring partner,
Will we cleave our shells together until light?

A pungent flower moulders out of reach;
We sweat beneath our clothing, holding still.
I itch all under skin to warm and choke you,
Each inch of you a hundred tiny feet.

Like brambles in a ditch, our bodies are
Embracers of the moist, yielding flesh.
We stumble toward some evanescent truth;
The night stabs down with needles made of stars.

THE SHADOW IN THE LAKE

Grandma in Four Sentences

She looked down at us,
Her brow a warning
Over an old stone door. Her
Knobby cane tapped against
The basement stair. "If I
Have to come down these steps
There's going to be trouble."

And she did not come down, and
There's been trouble ever since.

Mr. Blair in a Trance

A skein of vines holds tha old gate shut

And no wind blows dramatically.

I have come, after childhood,

To the orchard's remains, and no

Branches reach to soothe me.

The old house grounds are overgrown;

Not one pane of glass catches sun

Or my return; the roof leans into sky.

I have come to a place

Where no one calls from the front porch

And inside, no stove remains, no pot

Of boiling rice, no running water;

I do not go upstairs, but I know

There is no bed, no Maple dresser,

And no older brother to tease.

One would think this house would fall,

But it remains. In the skeletal,

Crumbling hall I see no photographs;

I stand bereft of family

Fortune, and no door bars me

(cont.)

From the master bedroom, where no
Empty water glass stands poised by a
Headboard built of Oak, also gone.

I am aware of many absences, each
Vanished thing a palpable loss;

Ands every rotting timber,
Every ruined square of wallboard
Calls out an affront, though the free
Wind kindles memories, the caress
Of hands long dead.

Celestials, after the Ball

Bones? Coming apart

Again? Was that your eye?

My feet? Someone worth

Standing on?

Freshen your drink? Switch

To solvent? Hand

Me my arm? Where is that

Firmament we ordered?

 Everything keeps

Falling.

Ned Bowen Explains

The Mystery of Shroyer Hill

Weeds shuffled in wind, pawed
Dry, brown bottles, concrete stairs,
A crumbling wall of stone.

Below, the Big Blue glinted, one
Steel tendril of a lake
To the South. My feet found out

A grave marker, hidden in the weeds:
Here lies a child
Who did not last the winter.

Every year now, in Spring, I go
To root out nearby growth and clear
The stone. There is no voice

In the wind, no demanding spirit
But my own. I do it for the boy,
And I tell no one.

Local Artist's Lament

Next to the bridge in Cottonwood Falls,
Lush trees adorn the river's brown.
Every resident has seen it,
And my paintings go unknown.

Whole towns have found me useless
Over drinks. True, I never go long
Without the gnawing of gut, the shallow
Prance of nerves. And I have never
Gone far. Just far enough
To see the holly bushes, or a copse
Of distant poplars. Nearby cattle bend
Down, lashing wiry grasses with their tongues;
I paint with smooth, clean strokes,
Like a river rounding stones. But
Nothing ever sells for much.
Perhaps the rivers run too deep; the

(cont.)

Staggered trees too tall.. Every pub
For miles pays off in booze to give drunks
Something but their ashen visage
Shot back from a mirror.

I could show them something;
Were it not for tiny, bottled
Towns of whispers, towns
That ought to leap from bridges . . .

Last Night, in a house just down the Street

Do you feel my fingers? Love, they're
Buttercups. Now I'm floating under
You with hammers. I'll wake you when,
Stream past you when
I can.

There, light as a feather of rain.
Do you feel my fingers? They're
Pillows now. Breathe out
I'm losing my pulse

Your home is an inch to the left. Go
Back! Do you feel my fingers? They are
Axes now. Go back
You can't come up go back you'll
Break my wings!

Melancholy, Yellow Boat:

Dialogue with a painting by Edvard Munch

Who are the walkers on the dock?

My eyes indulge the milky blackness
Near the sea, remove the boathouse from
The background, repair the jawline
Of sky left in its wake.

Why does one wear white, the other
Black?

Remove the drowsy granite, the firm
Gray sand; greet every side of sea
With this calamity of sky.

Who occupies
Our corner of this
Torrid universe?

Bruise the sky with darkness, let it
crush the little boat.

(cont.)

Why sit on boulders

Pink and gray,

A rail against the sad,

Blue sea?

The white suggests a wedding dress to me.

New Love Too Soon

The sky is a tablet again. Love,
What sweet postures shall we make?
What trees embrace the wind, whose limbs
Pour music for us?

Tell me what slow tinsel dances
Grass performs, what stars will
Dance the waltz we wish, what
Animals will notice us?

On forest's edge a wind owl sits,
His yellow gaze a slow censure;
What shadow melts into the lake
When this day's sun goes down?

Whisper

After Baudelaire

Down to all the rain impinges
Burrows in unforrowed ground.
Hallowed cousin Earth, we're coming,
Drowning in your livid sky

And the grasses sweetly calling
Each a whisper of its own
Pull to us, the gauze and webbing
Lightly forcing, down to lie.

Upward for each falling narrow
Leaf would reach this fallow ground.
Must we answer when the grasses
Sweetly call us down to lie?

In a meadow bones are humming,
Skins are saying sweet goodbyes.
Water stretches, skewing skyline,
Down the grasses call to sky.

THE WHITE FIELD

When Kitten Prowls the Neighborhood

Iris folds into

Your eyes, neighbor trees

Debate with air, and the cool

Morning clings to you like a

Skipping stone. Out of it all, one

Dry leaf shuffles across the walk,

Where a cat again tries

To unleash phantom claws. She tips

Her head, enticed by the slightest

Shudder of movement, a blaze of synapse

And fur. Now a clump of crabgrass

Shivers in the breeze, and

The cat is on it, a spinning frenzy.

Far away, a bank of rushes

Ladles cotton to the wind.

Another Question About Seasons

This snowfield
Gives up ghosts of steam; old weeds
And wire, stubble of
Cornstalks, trenches. Where does
The Winter go?

I once saw winter
Lightning
In a field freshly white,
But the Sun rose next day
To ice-crowned trees.

Could all of that have been
A prelude
To this whispering away
As the white field
Warms its bones?

Evening on the Plains

Rustle of weed on boot,
On denim; we are miles out,
Adrift.

Light crowns on horizon--
Elmdale, Cottonwood, Strong.

We hear low voices of shells

In stone:

Ancient clambled

Ancient sea

Ancient need to

Be here.

Two Postcards from St. Louis

I.

Even this city's silver arch, its array of
Trees and shrubs, its shops with their keychains
And film; even the expensive restaurants,
Taverns and hotels; the city's strongholds of
Lust and virtue alike; its bastions of vestigial
Colonialism, its shapely, contoured streets;
Even the city's mane of fog, its velvet
Tufts of downy air . . .
All are suspended, inextricably held
Upside-down above a lake of fire.

II.

Yes, golden shafts of light erupt, at times,
From our shimmering troughs of waterfowl
And gods; and yes, our limestone depot,
Festooned with flags and riddled with corbelled,
Vaulted archways, occasionally bathes
In hues of pallid green;
But what of this city's promise? Its
Dreams? Its triumphal, silvery arch?

A Picture

A woman holds her baby near
the paved, low-numbered highway where
a polished station wagon sits.

A man works underneath

the vehicle while baby cries
and Mother tries to comfort her.

Up comes the wind to spin the leaves
of roadside trees into

the husband's eyes; he blinks and coughs.

Baby cries and Mother pats
and that is, then, the universe
which even death cannot retract.

Notes on Memphis

City street: river of scowls

Weary buildings, rough-hewn

Stone, both laced and held in place

By iron girders--

Beale Street thrashes out its

Pantomime of hope,

Around bright neon lights and crumbling,

Jealous facades.

Riverbank

One willow dips to water's edge,
A kiss of leaves to sky;
Cattails break against the stillness
Of this place. Do we need stones
To overturn?

Each corner of the air suggests
Smooth descent of skin,
And rivers sleep beneath us
When we rise.

Here's to Kansas

To stippled snow in cornfields,
Fences buried under drifts,
White dunes beneath an ample sky;

To burning fields of Spring,
Pasture blackened for miles,
Smoke that curls across the road;

To flatbed trucks by farmponds,
Water boiling over bass,
Songs of ones that got away;

To deerstands in windmills,
Landscape gold as straw,
The harvest moon's cold eye.

I, Brian Neal Kirchner, hereby submit this thesis to Emporia State University as partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree. I agree that the Library of the University may make it available for use in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I further agree that quoting, photocopying, or other reproduction of this document is encouraged for private study, scholarship (including teaching) and research purposes of a nonprofit nature. No copying which involves potential financial gain will be allowed without written permission of the author.

Brian Neal Kirchner
Signature of Author

July 14, 1992
Date

The White Field
Title of Thesis

Ray Cooper
Signature of Graduate Office Staff Member

July 15, 1992
Date Received

Distribution: Director, William Allen White Library
Graduate School Office
Author