

REPORTS FROM THE PROVINCE

By

UWE MICHAEL DIETZ

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Chair: Sidney Wade
Major Department: English

This thesis contains twenty-six poems completed over the course of my two years of study in the Creative Writing Program of the Department of English at the University of Florida. There are nineteen original poems and seven translations from three contemporary Mexican poets: Hernán Bravo Varela, Sergio Valero, and Luigi Amara. Of the original poems, they may in cases have begun as sketches, jottings, journals, dreams, observations, imitations, assignments, poems in their own right, and the like. There are sonnets and a haiku and a pantoum. Considering the lot, the poems here may contain traces of disclosure, correspondence, rumor, memoranda, rejoinder, instruction, dispatch, missive, and report.

LAST VIEW OF THE TANON STRAIGHT

Water lines on the dock posts mark only the passing of a ferry—Manila to Dumaguette—a wave that pushes driftwood into the sea wall, rips the palm boat from its strand, then straightens out again.

Our unmooring is plangent and visible.

Silt from the river sifts into the salt of the sea, roosters wake along the shore, and fishermen beat fish to their nets, those fish quickening, rushing.

The tide holds high as sound slakes the tongue—its syllables are those of the sea.

Where the dark-blue range charred with cane fire meets the green stab of this coastline, sparrows fleck themselves onto the lightening sky.

The strait elides the mountain-kiln, the palm-strike—its dilation easy, tractable.

“A COUNTRY ROAD. A TREE.”

—*Waiting for Godot*

the tree has four or five leaves

ivy and quill-leaf sheathing its pared branches

the osprey tends this cypress fringe,

its August rills tuned over the cicada's drum

the sun is the lake's painter, suffusing it birdless,
forgetful

coursing the wails of the lake's streams through the cattail

unraveling the water blue then to flame

there's no geometry when the heron's unroosted

from a stand of bloodroot, sawgrass, and maidencane

that consumes the lake's dry braise

while its water is drawn off to the karstland
and it beckons an oily green

THE CREVICE HUNTER

Only light sheathes the walls
of an empty room.
With neither masks nor mirrors,
without nails that cast their brazenness.

I look for mistakes and fissures.
I hunt for the crevice,
the small crossing, the sign
of worlds with shadows.

A ghost in the limestone is enough
—the fleeting star of a spider—
to tie straight lines
to my insomniac,
alert glance,
and quench its thirst for shapes.

I look for mistakes in the smoothness.
The thunder from a singularity
in the white abyss.

—Luigi Amara, “El cazador de grietas”

BIRTH SONG

My indolence was fixed the troubled season
I came two months past due. Delivery
Was meant for fall. The winter's armored song
Was pushed, but my syllables descended late.

An autumn speech could never weather well;
I ran and tripped, arriving in the month
Where words were iced to thaw with spring's assault.
What could my solemn mother offer me?

I saw her winded, collapsed upon her bed
And put a finger by it—my conception
Was a groundswell off the California coast,
A quickened surge that broke, then broke ashore:

My throat unharrowed choked the rooting of the vines;

ROBINSON CRUSOE FEIGNS NAVIGATION

A hundred days. The beach has sketched the unsettled shipwrecks.

Boats useless, masts that have cared to wait for signs: the sea is a first approximation of the imagery of the deserted.

My bare feet will defeat any doubt, will halt the mapping.

UNDER COVER OF AN ACACIA

I watched the evening of my thirtieth year wrench its shorthand from April's thaw in one moment under the cover of an acacia, off the country road that wore down to the sawgrass thicket piercing the armored lake. Nature, having natured me, inhaling her spring so that a single grain could not escape my view, stood so still by the hemlock that, in the nativities of cypress knees, I watched the adder bear his puff; in the sandy mound of brain-work below me, the fire ant stropped his thews; and near the heavy-nested sumac, the cowbird forsook her brood.

(RICHARD WILBUR IN MARINE BOREDOM)

This house is a den of lighthouses and latches.

In boats that have waited at the edge of the harbor, that list with the hope of looking at no one, there's always a question of life or death similar to the silence of the beach.

From the din of seagulls, my daughter writes a tale.

CONTRANATURA

Lord

*The cage has become a bird
What will I do with this fear*

—Alejandra Pizarnik

*Faith in the eyeglass, not the eye;
in the staircase, never the step;
in the wing, not the bird,
and only in you, only in you, only in you.*

—César Vallejo

1

*before dying
the sun casts open the only lip of its face
who threw the rock of the sun over the waves?
the sun's only lip casts its light to a new angle
death has passed like a bird in the night
with sleep woven into each feather
only the feeble conception of flight
endless
only a finite song until the wings are clipped*

2

Of that which no longer exists I never
write. Astrolabe of rhyme with a transparent tail:
a pheasant. I prefer
to say it, insisting on the fugue towards a voice
that is thinner. That way the verses of suspended lips
awaken and the drift surges like a tremor
of speech.

3

your mouth is the bony framework of the sun
a fruit under siege by the music of touch
I touch your mouth
to enter a reason of moss in bone
I bite with your mouth to sharpen my taste for light
your silence is an illumination of hatred
the suns of your mouth will always come from heaven
small white clouds gather from the still madwoman
of your tongue
beyond the silence your madness does not last
does not utter any light
your light cuts off as your voice becomes dust
I touch your voice with the penultimate reach of my silence
your voice is a measureless brim
your voice is the unkindled ceiling of heaven
does not know of madness
knows only of impossible journeys
I touch your mouth of emblazoned rivers
of words of winter

4

If it's about longing, we'll talk
 about the rain. We'll build a hearth
 so we can talk about the rain. Come, touch here,
 dampen your fingers
 on this liquid star, let us leave death
 to flower
 for only one day. Come, never to speak
 is not to drink of this water.

5

*your word
 an alebrije of smoke
 the word of smoke is an indolent light
 heart
 heaven casts open its wings to your staircase of voices
 let me be death
 you do not know how to climb the steps if it is not with dead eyes
 let me scale the crags of your touch
 silence heart
 take the keys of my face
 take my body like an atom of faith
 believe the myths of the salt
 make for me a statue of black marble
 my belief is the scale divining your thirst
 heart
 let me believe you are a rock thrown to the infinite*

6

A painful word always falls two or more
 times in the same place. On this night
 the flashes of lightning lack the immensity
 of screams. Night remains whispered
 a submission: its prayer is reason
 for being of the abandoned. Of all these words take
 only the music
 from the ray, the rest the gray illumination plated
 by silence.

7

until the next apple
your breath sustains abandonment
dawn has expired the draft of its hands
leave the water to be the season preceding the touch
autumn drops its razors in your eyes
the season is next to fall between your fingers
hold my reason until the next apple
your breath is the mountain that falls through the abyss
paradise until the next apple
scale one apple until reaching heaven
leave heaven to be the darkness of the kiss
let me be the reason for autumn
until the next apple

8

When the light weakens
 you do not hold this voice in silence. When you speak
 my name
 you will hear salt falling toward the clouds;
 you will meet water
 through a draft of rain between your bare feet:
 a luminous murmur
 of morning besieged. Go, run after that faith
 for the possible; and when this weakens
 do not hold the light any longer with your silence.

*just like feet sunk
in depths of ice
like the dark breeze from a sea
never-ending
Mediterranean love
like from clouds
like from timid clouds in the house of the wind
inside the house of sleep
where no one awakens
just like a thousand walls where to forget
the hands
where to shut the mouth
when the scream is close
just like two bodies
lying over the water
just like two bodies
split in their history
like you and me
a single indolence*

—Sergio Valero, “Contranatura”

HIKONE CASTLE, FEBRUARY

The walls white, the smell
of fields thawing—a swan's neck
and muddied body.

“THE MELANCHOLY PROGRESS OF MY HOPES”

—*Paul Gauguin*

And comes the night where, near my hut,
In complete silence I dream of violent harmonies
In the natural scenes that intoxicate me.

Beyond the sea of home I have not claimed
The hired raws and ochres: the sap-green ease
Of farms removed my need for bought vermillion.

Today I placed a limpid landscape and a stream,
I felt my palette pulse from feather, fruit, and skin.

If one could so resign and then atone
With the passing of shades, with tempers that bloom
In translation from city to tropics,
I would announce upon this shore my newest burden—

To catch what's put adrift each waning tide
In the far-off joy of the sun's glare.

DISPATCHES

1

Gugnon has fallen asleep in the path of the Santander-Barili provincial bus, and the oldies say he'll take long to die—tortured by a handleless figurine from a bowling trophy, a girl's charm of a child kneeling to feed the birds, a coin of San Ignacio de Loyola (Maltese Cross on the flipside), a thumb-sized clay stone veined in quartz.

He goes on rubbing his face with cornstarch to ward off the spirits, drinking his *tuba*, and eating the glass.

2

The palm reader from the Rat Gang, Zamboanga Province, Mindanao, has studied my hand, steeping his *nueve oraciones* in oil from the yellow coconut and pronouncing, "A good man." Like his son.

I pay him with Tanduay Five-Years and cigarettes.

3

Alfred Obsioma, leader of the Catholic God Spirit Group, Bukidnon Province, Mindanao, has been asked why nine from his group weren't invisible to the troop's bullets. He says, "They failed in their vows."

4

The hermaphroditic faith healer in Dumaguette, Negros Oriental, has checked my back after a fall hiking in the jungle. He massages a drop of oil from the yellow coconut into my skin, belches, and says someone has pushed a cold wind into my spine.

5

Dispatches have grown exigent and conspicuous, and I heed them.

ON A CROOKED SIXPENCE (PANTOUM OF VULGAR ERRORS)

I don't know if it will do any good
to place it nine nights beneath your pillow,
but it cured me of an ague last spring.
First, pass it three times under the paunch of an ass,

then place it nine nights beneath your pillow,
and eat the morning egg of a black pullet.
Or, pass it three times under the paunch of an ass,
steam three chalk crosses off the kitchen kettle,

eat the morning egg of a black pullet,
fashion an amulet from a mouse's muzzle.
Steam three chalk crosses off the kitchen kettle,
down a live spider with treacle or jam,

fashion an amulet from a mouse's muzzle,
carry chips from the gallows next to your skin.
Down a live spider with treacle or jam,
wear withes of woodbine taken from the oak,

carry chips from the gallows next to your skin,
cross your bare feet and thrash them with holly.
Wear withes of woodbine taken from the oak,
stay a lace with nine knots around your neck,

cross your bare feet and thrash them with holly,
drive nails in the stile where travelers pass.
Stay a lace with nine knots around your neck,
wrench out a lock of hair and peg it to a tree,

drive nails in the stile where travelers pass.
This cured me of a bad ague last spring,
when I pegged a lock of hair to a tree,
but I don't know if it does any good.

JACKSON, CALIFORNIA

Where summer breaches fall
to be devoured by winter,
where the lake has hardened
down to three ponds,
where wind through the dry leaves
brings the sound of rain where there is no rain,
the oaks full of mistletoe
screen a group of boys kneeling,
chewing stalks of scrub grass
and dodging yellow star-thistle and tumbleweed.
They have no memory of the ridge
raising high here,
the shade of the miners
resting long in their bones.

MOORING

Strip down. Clench the bitter end. Dive.
Swim, Antonio, it's thirty meters down.
Find the further-under. Typhoon-test it.
Cast away the temptations that pock you
fish-hollow-quiet and rabid-reeling.
While you seek lost or ruined things,
anchor-bend the standing to the mooring.
Rise straight up. Pull your naked body out.
Heave the sea from your belly. Stand on deck,
cyanotic but steady, deaf but not dumb.

ABUNDANCES

The afternoon empties,
so only steps hear its murmur.

To fold syllables slightly
like looking for shapes in a tree.

To throw a boomerang word
that returns and speaks of regions,
of wombs and hurricanes
—a peregrine word—

that speaks and returns with Andromeda,
with vaultings and with amphibians,
that touches ribbon,
that inhales the perfume
of smoke blood foam,
 and that on the page,
in an alchemy of ink, has already settled,
near to exploding,
to overflowing.

—Luigi Amara, “Plétoras”

SONG FOR THE TANON STRAIGHT

*he casts his sight above the horizon:
I follow this sea-captain's stare*

*my eyes skim the flatness for flashes of hungry schools,
and I fish, with the cursed eyes of the fisher-boy*

*I scout for tugboats and cane ships,
eyes darting like the ferryman's for traffic and swell*

*lovers burn their eyes on sun through the palm fronds;
I share the rum-set glaze of the mariner*

*I hold a sailor's gaze at midnight,
and I sleep, with the fogged sight of the night-diver*

THE NIGHT DIVER

The moon through the palm fronds was enough for me then,
but it wasn't enough for Nistor, the diver.
Nor were the lightning bugs
that gathered to glow along the Talisay-tree by night-fall;
nor the swinging cherries of the boys smoking;
nor the fishermen bobbing kerosene lanterns
for the fry they'd slit open to dry with the dawn.

At night, beneath a sea muffled by a flooding, muddy river,
his torch would shine well in the caves.
And, out of the caves, the luminescence of algae,
shaken by wave, paddle, and outrigger wake,
lit well enough for him to follow
the sparking pairs of cuttlefish and squid.

But, landed and dry, as cane fires smoldered,
as geckos flicked over fluorescents gathering moths,
while *Rosalinda Mi Amor* played out on the TV next door,
Nistor, the diver, switched on his night-light.

TAILINGS

Reserved, collared,
the earth's pit knew well its own inwardness.
We mined, leached and sluiced,
and wheeled the grit off over the hilltops.

The ground bucked hard against the extraction.
And so the cut-off;
the outcrop slaked
and surfeited by silt, soil, copper and arsenic.

Come summer, we'll wade the low grass,
pluck and pull the thin ends tight between our thumbs.
Watchful of falling for the less-than-fineness of fools' gold,
we'll return to survey, walk and reckon
the promise of striking one troy-ounce of flat-land.
Tailing: a word for how we stand,
downshadow of mining wheels on a less-than-even earth.

“TONY, TONY TURN AROUND—SOMETHING'S LOST AND MUST BE FOUND”

Anton Poirier found signs & he loved them,
went for rhythm first—tractable or rigid—

 No Brush No Lather No Rub-In
always kept a rhythm within himself
and spelled for us his name, P-O-I-R-I-E-R.

His was a low-gear go-tell,
like the sign painted on his truck's tailgate:

 International Travel'r—Famous Truck—Ex-MIA
 Volcano Surveyor—Dogs—Over 30—Around-The-World
 Land—Water—Mountains

Awkward that he built his ward then let it wane,
how he'd Shoot The Brutes Some Spread It On
and fall into heavy irregular & unimaginable
redactions, crave abysses almost.

He let his beard grow & was apt to drive away.
These were Anton's hedges & high ways.

THE SOUND OF THE PENCIL

Almost with the pleasure of reuniting a finger
some time lost
between the thumb and the index,
I hear the graphite song,
the strange melody
I had begun to forget.

Calm like the gesture
of tearing with the pencil
its fruit spreads in the afternoon.

Not the sudden
instantaneous flash
from the match:
the slow illumination
that in its rustling
rises from the page.

—Luigi Amara, “El sonido del lapiz”

THE WIDOW'S WIND CHIMES

I. Sutter Creek, California

 Their wood warped, each strike or shake
the center reed sounds rich
 but the other four bang

 like fence boards lamenting the nails
that drove them into loose fence frames.

 Each winter I hide my jigsaw,
leave their tails tuned to the din
 that hardened in his brain.

II. Sutter Creek, California

 Thin air, delta breeze,
and a rain that soaks
 the bamboo wind chimes.

 Each night I think to scrape
through my underbrush scuttle

 and heal the quickened wound
she has hung above me
 in the olive tree.

THE LEFT SIDES OF THE TYPHOON

in a glass room
framed by the eye
of the storm the first
drop is retained
to split the nape of the tide

the first will be the last reflected

2

the typhoon strikes
it wrests all the insects
out of order the bees
marching the ants
slick with honey the beetle
in the kitchen the cockroach
in the dung

the butterfly rioting next to the locust

3

the sea brazes
in the inlet of an island
to the west
and ocean
floods over ocean

water walks slowly over water

BETWEEN TWO FIELDS

Between two fields my father stands tilling
the kind of grudge that holds him silently.

Framed by straight woods, by the green that grows between,
he wants fields cut from linden

to set vineyards and orchards
plumb and near.

Barren only of labor,
fit for neither rye nor beets,

he remains divining from the same soft woods,
marking-off clearings from old country to new.

*Drop your witching stick when you hit water
beneath the same willow where your well stood at home.*

WAVE

The ocean called my grammar green the day I swelled—

Those are verbs, your colors—

Let your deeper brother black you, blue

In the instance of my middle wave, kelp against my belly,
coral stammering my feet

—now free—

I'll arc my head over, eye my adolescence in the sky once more:
in one fast gasp I'll spit foaming salt,

I'll blue to shallow green, transpose myself with lover sand:

I'll brown, puddle, fall away under,

to black again deep, then blue, green these verbs against the shore.

REPORTS FROM THE PROVINCE

Of the species barrier and the language barrier
I knew only these Visayan names:
talisay, malatapay, Maria de cacao.
And then the barrier of silence.

(Like the tree that hung over and across
the Matutinao River, which no one knew the name of.)

Green fear, disgust with the jungle-rot,
the harmonies lambent or horrible,
and, at night, the spring of the tongue and the eye
was wound even tighter,

or so I thought, while we watched the lightning
off the coast of Negros Oriental.
(The palm trees hid
the line of the horizon.

Patterns—cellular, biological—
moved from sea to land.
Patterns of the sea,
of rain, of waves, of coral,

moved fungus and worms ashore.
This shell here once stank, is now a fossil.)

The storms wouldn't hit here until midnight,
so we lay and watched the stars overhead, too.

Antonio, our guide
and but a few years older,
could pose in the glaring,
unopposable light:

“It’s a different world down there.
 The water is so still it’s like oil.”
 (I yielded to indifference here,
 to the regularity of the river’s waves.)

I began to play with the back-light
 and the fore-light:
 I watched the back-light on the trees on the hill,
 with the trees in front of the clouds.

(This was easy: the sunlight rippling
 on the sea was the same sheen
 that stippled through the *malatapay* leaves.)
 Then the trees against the blue sky.
 Then the trees against the night.
 Then the trees layered over themselves.
 Then the trees in front of the huts.
 Then the walls and angles.
 Then the faces, and the back- and the fore-light.

(The light that made the palm tree,
 that formed the home,
 formed Antonio’s face.
 Still, everything was always full of light and always wet.)

All along that trip it was the voice of the wind
 saying, *move along, move along*,
 that moved us along like the river-ripple
 —hesitant, but going.

It was the voice of Antonio asking,
Unsa?
Nothing’s here.
Why have you stopped?

The mangroves stretched from Alegria to Badian.
 We were then unmoored to face
 the banks of the Matutinao.
 (It was here he left us,

and our confidence shifted:

*Antonio, Antonio,
who would keep us sound,
to tell us no longer when to turn back around.)*

We constantly rubbed the river-silt
and sleep-sand out of our eyes.
There was a certain terror in the river
—from the rocks we didn't first notice,

making the green water blue as we dove in
—velocity, inversions of still water, wave, stroke and wake
—endowing that blue water with motion
and us with fear.

How often did we notice
the road in was the same as the road out?
We glanced at it once,
took a picture of its warning

where the jungle rose over us,
kawayan reached toward the river;
bugang climbed the granite walls:

*Please enjoy the beauty of God's Creation.
Should you have other agenda or inimical
acts toward Nature, please confine them
to yourself. Do not do it here, for it
will be dealt with accordingly.*

Every part of every day
the river was something different
—shape, reflection, color—
the way it handled the horizon, framed it, the shore,

the river reflecting the same.
(Sunsets came from less matter
than pollution or cane-fire.)
It was the quality of light that I'd been searching for,

shadows and clouds making the green water black, like oil.
And that drift from the river,
to the jungle to the sea to the sky
—would that it be harnessed much the same.

These trails that we wedged and planed,

every day and mood
—where confidences and terrors
weren't as wide, and neither was the river—

it was here between the leaves of that silent ingrown tree
where I saw my composure screened in, and waited.

(OCTAVIO PAZ SEES THE NAME BORN)

In the water, rock and salmon acknowledge each other, wrap the name with sand that lips have sought with timid signs, murmurs.

The name is a thorn that scratches whiteness, and spreads to assume itself like heaven forewarned of torment.

The night cloudy, lips stand between nests and leaves, throw their peaceful water to the ground. Unfolding without pause, they bind the hour of dawn by coming.

Deluge and thunder descend, missives of blind membership; they subtract and link the pages of the world.

Between the commissures of their lips, between the branches that define the totality of the woods, the name has been born. Temple in the original silence, autumn in the voice never falling.

In the realm of the name, one awakens, celebrates the division of the waters and the land. While God rests upon the last tree standing, lips sustain an olive branch, a prayer.

A dove rests on the shoulder of the wind.

—Hernán Bravo Varela, “(Octavio Paz ve nacer el nombre)”

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Uwe Michael Dietz was raised in Northern California. He earned his A.B. in English and environmental studies from Bowdoin College, in Brunswick, Maine, and taught English in Yokohama, Japan, before enrolling at the University of Florida. Additional biographical information may be found on pages seven, thirteen, and twenty-three.