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PREVIEW

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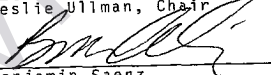
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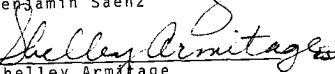
PREVIEW


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THESIS

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## PREFACE

### From A Former Landscape: Explaining My Poetry

Everyone is more or less aware of his silent reading voice when he writes. The largest part of my satisfaction in writing poetry comes from listening to this inner voice. In fact, my poems invariably begin with this voice before I sit down to write. Perhaps this is a way of describing one's muse; if it is, my muse owns the inner voice. Listening is everything. Whenever I get stuck for the next word or line, it is because I have stopped listening.

When William Stafford talked about "receptivity," I assume that he was acknowledging the importance of this inner voice; what Richard Hugo called his "triggering town" may very well be this voice. An important implication in this is that sound becomes for me the guiding force in what I write. I do not compose in order to relate some event to a shadowy reader. I write out of a desire to approximate in language the sound of the inner voice. This voice responds to the physical and psychological landscapes in which I grew up.

However much I might try to abstract this inner voice from my personality, it is still part of that personality; and whatever shapes my personality, shapes it, too. I cannot prove that I would write a different sort of poem in a different sort of way had I grown up in

New York or in East Texas instead of in West Central Texas, but I think so. It is a region whose physical landscape is unsettling in its austerity and vatic through hints of a limitless freedom. Also, a sense of alienation inheres. Listening to the inner voice as it responds to the landscape produces a style and a vision. So, an austerity, an attempt to come to terms with whatever spiritual-vates that the landscape suggests, and an alienation mark the poetry in this volume.

The poem "Miles From Anywhere Usual" concerns two young men hunting, and it suggests through its imagery the harshness of the region, and the language reflects a sense of alienation from nature. It is a poem about an irony that has never escaped me: the land itself does not welcome people. The final section follows:

When the day was spent shells and our jackets  
swollen  
with death, we sat and yielded to the daggered wind  
until the shocked black arms of mesquite shrieked  
and the sockets of ponds deep dazed by ice,  
scared us into prayer  
miles from anywhere usual or even occasional.

I was once told by a poet-teacher that if I did indeed have a vision, I should "get rid of it." I have yet to understand his response. Perhaps he thinks that an



artistic vision makes a poet less open to new ideas. I disagree, though. The world is out to get us all: that's part of my vision. We learn through experiencing someone's death how relentless is the world's determination. As Wallace Stevens once asked, "Why is the world so old so mad/That the people die?" One way to cope with the austerity of such a question is to accept death's reality. "December 2, 1965" is a poem spoken by a young boy whose father has just died. It begins

My brother is home from sitting  
with my father at the hospital.  
Mother yells No. I am in  
another room and tiptoe to the door,  
not wanting to be heard because  
I am happy that he finally died,  
that this is such and that is finished.  
Now go on with our lives.

When I thought about my aunt, who died nearly 25 years before I was born, and who was herself a poet, I created what voice I thought she might use to ponder her own mortality in a tuberculosis sanitorium where she died in 1929.

I have to trust  
in something, because this is a world so strange

the people in it die for explanations  
which they never ever get.

In these two poems, and in others I've written, I find it useful to create a persona to speak. Doing so is a way to--at least partially--overcome the distance between us all. It suggests an imaginative strategy for overcoming some of the alienation that naturally exists. To speak as someone else might is an ethical act because the practice of empathy is an ethical act.

Although I do not write in forms, I do tend toward a regular meter. . This, too, relates to the landscape in which I grew up. The land is flat and seems to run on forever. The northern boundary of west central Texas is the Caprock; the western boundary is the Pecos river; the eastern boundary is the Brazos; the southern boundary is more difficult to demarcate. My response to this vastness is to control the line. I do not always do so, but when I do, it helps me order my existence. One of art's duties, I believe, is to impose some kind of regularity on the chaotic noise our world makes.

So much space, as well as austerity, in the landscape gives rise to what might be called a "spiritual" element in what I try to write. I may possess a grim vision of the world, but that is not to say I write a hopeless art. Perhaps the closest I came to doing so is in

the poem "Searching for Bethzatha," referring to a pool of water mentioned in the **New Testament** that was believed to have healing power. Jesus once encountered a man there who had been sick a long time. He asked the man if he wanted to be healed. I assume that all of us seek such a place, which is a positive thing, even though we may not locate it.

That is the way it goes here.  
The world is dark above our heads  
and bends down frequently  
to hold out for us  
its empty hands.

Even though I see the final stanza as hopeless, others, especially those of a Zen bent, have read it as a kind of positive affirmation.

Another poem dealing with spirituality is "The Drunk in The Rapture," which is one of those "What If" poems: What if a drunken man emerged from a bar at the exact time of "the last trumpet?" Or what if a World War 2 soldier made it through the fighting without a scratch, but on his way driving home to be reunited with his wife and children, suffered an injury that alters his mind and his world forever? The poem is called after its subject, "Bill Brooks." These "What if?" poems reflect what really does happen. There is a gulf between what might happen and what always does; it is important to recognize that gulf; I try.

Poetry, for me, is a way of answering questions that my landscape has posed. Sometimes the questions emerge from the physical landscape, sometimes from the psychological landscape, or the spiritual. They also emerge from the intellectual landscape. If I am frequently a regionalist in the poetry--especially in its sense of place--I hope that my ideas are more cosmopolitan. The following assertions and opinions are part of a self-interview. Interviews with writers are popular, and I enjoy reading them. It's odd, but some writers have difficulties either finding the time to write their *ars poetica*, else they don't care to do so. The interview has become, therefore, a way of eliciting from writers their views on their respective crafts, on the meaning of writing, the style of life most conducive to their writing, and other sundries. Toward that goal, I hope the reader will find the following interview responses helpful. It was conducted in El Paso, Texas in June of 1999.

Int.: Let's get some of the basics out of the way. For example, Why did you start writing poetry?

Bedichek: The fashionable answer is that I started writing because I wasn't invited to the party. Someone famous said that. Don't ask me who. The truth is, I began writing back in the 1970s because, at the time,

I was out of work, out of school, and I had some emotional difficulties that prevented me from leaving my house. Agoraphobia, I think they call it. A very miserable sort of thing. Writing was a way of expressing and sorting through some confusion, and it gave me a lift because I could claim an identity as a writer. Of course, before that, I had been interested in literature. My family was well-educated; I grew up two blocks from a university library.

Int.: So you were a good student.

Bedichek: I was a lousy student. I read a lot. But I preferred to study what I wanted.

Int.: Do you think, then, that people who write poetry are rebellious?

Bedichek: I think that people who write poetry are certainly different from people who, I don't know, uh, repair cars or balance ledgers.

Int.: I wanted to ask about . . .

Bedichek: Wait. I don't want to leave the impression that I started writing because I was nuts and that I'm a confessional poet because of some psychic pain. I don't even think there are confessional poets and non-confessional ones. It's all confession. Some of us disguise it better than others.

Int.: Thanks. What writers have influenced you?

Bedichek: Who was it wrote, "I am part of all

that I have seen"? Tennyson, I think. Well, I'm a part of all that I've seen and read. We all are. But I can give you a list of people whose work affected me: Roethke, Dylan Thomas, Dickey, James Wright, Stevens, Rich, Levine, Hugo, Lorca, Patchen.

Int.: Do you read a lot of contemporary poetry?

Bedichek: I did a few years ago, but I got to the point where I thought I was being too derivative, so I cut back and returned to reading philosophy and sociology, some history and biography. The LBJ persona poem in this collection emerged after reading a couple of Johnson biographies.

Int.: What do you think about contemporary poetry?

Bedichek: I have a mixed response. There's an incredible number of writers doing great work-- Charles Wright, Merwin, Rich, and a hundred others. I worry a little about the sameness to some recent poetry. I like a poem to approach large ideas, and I don't see that happening much. Maybe we need better criticism of contemporary poetry. I think we need to demand more from poets. Shock, or performance, poetry is popular. It may be having an influence on how more traditional poets are writing. Investigating that influence would make for an interesting essay.

Int.: You've spent a good chunk of the last few