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Reflection and Acceptance: Small Town Ghosts Represented in Poetry

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REFLECTION AND ACCEPTANCE: SMALL TOWN GHOSTS REPRESENTED IN POETRY

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the Master of Arts degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis discusses the theories of ethnography and ethnographic verse and applies these two theories in an original narrative in verse. Ethnography and ethnographic verse have a complicated relationship when it comes to a poet's authority representing a certain place. Yet authenticity is never obtainable, since perceptions of a place are always subjective. That subjectivity allows a poet creative expression, as he or she shapes his or her relationship with a place and the people within it. The poet then must rely on elements like unifying imagery, dialect, surrealism, and empathetic insights. With these elements, a poet can identify with a community through unique descriptions and reflection that build connections between that poet and his or her subjects.

I utilize these elements in my own poetry. By using the theories of ethnography and ethnographic verse, I have written a manuscript of poetry that builds upon (and even deviates) from the works of poets I looked to during my research process. This manuscript of poetry attempts to represent a group of people in a rural small town. Rural realism and supernatural surrealism both create a sense of community for readers. In the end, the manuscript of poetry aims to establish a connection between the speaker and the community.

After this manuscript of poetry, I discuss the creative process that went into this thesis. I reflect upon the theories and concepts and how I have applied them in my own poetry. I then discuss works by Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and contemporary poets like Ted Kooser and Ron Rash. Finally, I analyze how those works influenced the decisions I made while composing my narrative in verse.

PREFACE

Ethnographic verse is a result of ethnography's interdisciplinary roots. At the start, critics believed that ethnography was strictly a social science. An ethnographer studied a certain culture and then recorded his or her observations about that culture. The ethnographer always needed to stay separate from the observed subject (Heuston 57). Modern ethnography encourages the opposite, where an ethnographer is always aware of his or her subjective limitations concerning a culture under analysis. That subjectivity results in creative and artistic expression for the ethnographer representing a certain place (Heuston 63). As a result, ethnographic verse takes shape, and it relies on poetic elements like imagery, dialect, surrealism, and reflection to establish an ethnographic poet's authoritative voice when describing a specific community and the people in it.

Applying these elements of the craft (and the theories of ethnography and ethnographic verse) helps me create an expansive and long narrative in verse. In Chapter One, I analyze these theories and analyze how poets might share similar characteristics to ethnography and ethnographic verse. The first two sections define the theories and then talk about prominent poets like Whitman and Frost and how they establish a sense of community through inclusive imagery. The subsequent sections examine contemporary poets and their methods in creating dialect and customs that best represent the character of a community. The final sections discuss the role of the supernatural as another way to examine a community as well as the speaker's relationship in the narrative in verse.

After discussing these poetic principles, I then show how I apply these principles to my own creative work. In Chapter Two, my narrative in verse shows parallels to key ideas examined in the previous chapter. This manuscript of poetry represents a small town and the people that used to reside there. The speaker in this narrative in verse tries to make sense of his past after leaving the town and the bad memories that came with it. Once he comes back to the town, the speaker finds himself in an odd place that is somehow part of the real world and yet part of a different dimension. The speaker notes this otherworldly factor of the town in the first poem, and this is where the past and the present collide. While the setting is based on a real location, it also features ghosts and other surreal elements that make the past conflict with the present. During this conflict, the speaker in the narrative in verse identifies himself with the community and makes meaning from the past and the present for the sake of his immediate future.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I analyze my work and how it adheres to and, at the same time, deviates from ethnographic verse. This chapter looks at key points I took from other poets and how I brought these poetic models together, as I shaped my own work. I give an in-depth perspective of my creative writing process and how I crafted the poems that appear in my collection. After that, I discuss the significance of the poems' placements in the collection and their importance in the narrative's development.

Chapter One: Narrative in Verse Based on Ethnographic Theories

Understanding the past and its significance to a character in a narrative in verse can help a poet reflect on his or her relationship to a real-world location. A poet may carry strong feelings (both positive and negative) about a hometown, and that poet might come back to that hometown to project those feelings back onto the buildings, streets, and people once familiar. Although the poet writes about an actual place, the poet does not necessarily have to write an autobiographical piece of nonfiction, where he or she records everything in verse as the town and people appear before the poet. Sometimes feelings of a place are so strong, especially if they revolve around issues of loneliness and regret, that fiction can weave perfectly with the nonfictional setting to best understand those complex emotions. A poet may take the setting, people, and events and create a fictional narrative in verse around those nonfictional elements, so that the poet can represent a place from his or her own perspective. This combination of the subjective depictions of a real place with fictional elements has its roots in early works and theories of ethnography and ethnographic verse. As a poet following this ethnographic theory, I argue that the use of the real and the surreal helps me establish an emotional connection with a community.

Ethnography already offers individual and creative freedom for a writer. This theory focuses on other cultures and an ethnographer's depictions of those cultures. As James Clifford notes, ethnography is "a state of being in culture while looking at culture, a form of personal and collective self-fashioning" (qtd. in Heuston 1). An ethnographer, based on Clifford's definition, may write about and identify with the

culture under analysis. Through writing, an ethnographer preserves the characteristics of a culture while still acknowledging that the written work is based on his or her subjective viewpoint. This subjectivity is part of the "personal and collective self-fashioning" Clifford discusses in his book, where ethnography as a social science becomes an art form for a writer. The ethnographic writer may provide descriptions of a culture that are grounded in realism, but that writer might find a creative approach to make a connection with a certain place. Regarding ethnography's relationship to art, Amanda Ravetz states, "[Ethnography] involves the juxtaposition of similarity and difference and the disruption of old orders in a search for new understanding. Surrealism exemplifies ethnographic activity at its most radical, an irruption of the irrational through which other realities might be grasped" (17). Ethnographic writers make connections with a culture based on their own perspectives. A way for ethnographic writers to establish a sense of place for readers comes from the imaginative ways they represent and connect with locations and people in their compositions.

Creative approaches help ethnographers make meaning of not just a place and its people, but also that place's history. Ethnography sees a blending of the past and the present. George E. Marcus refers to this combination of past-present timelines as emergence. Marcus states that emergence in ethnographic works is when an ethnographer utilizes "a definable past and a captured present. The present becoming the near future at least shapes a common orientation of ethnographer and her [or his] subjects" (435). To orient oneself into the time and place of a culture, an ethnographer finds meaning in the past and the present to predict an immediate

future that stems from historical events within a culture. Kim Fortun furthers this concern of ethnography, stating, "The future is [predicted] when the past is folded into the way reality presents itself, setting up both the structures and the obligations of the future" (qtd. in Marcus 435). An ethnographer then reflects upon a place's culture and history and analyzes what might be the state of that place years from now. How do human actions influence the future? What are the roots of a place's troubles? These are questions an ethnographer might consider in his or her emergence of the past and the present. With such abstract concepts of time and place and their overall significance, ethnography makes a transition from mere scientific recordings to artistic compositions.

While ethnography deals with the ethnographer's observations about tension between a place and that place's past and present, ethnographic verse focuses on a writer's ability to establish an authoritative voice that convinces readers that events in a poem did or could have occurred. To explain ethnographic verse, Marc Manganaro states that a writer's "ability to convince is based primarily not upon the suitability or solidity of fieldwork, but upon the very task of convincing us [that he or she was actually at the scene of the poem]" (qtd. in Heuston 81-82). Like ethnography, ethnographic verse is subjective, so the representations of a place in a poem are not completely (if at all) authentic. However, ethnography heavily relies on its historical research, whereas ethnographic verse implements imagery, dialogue, and different points of view to give the appearances of truth. With such vivid details in a poem, ethnographic verse can represent a place credibly despite its questionable reliability.

The different approaches between ethnography and ethnographic verse nevertheless confirm the validity of balancing reality and fabrication in poetry, as it expresses a special relationship between a poet and his or her subject. Originally, ethnographic verse clearly separated the roles of the poet and the subject for the sake of authenticity. Poets, like scientists, recorded the societal data around them, while the observed people performed daily activities uninterrupted. Such first-person interference made for inauthentic work (Heuston 57). Ethnographic poets had to write what they saw before them. While some poets may not have identified themselves as ethnographers, they faced issues of authenticity and what it meant to create an accurate portrayal of a place. In this initial mindset of poetry and place, poets needed to act more like ethnographers and write just what they saw around them, no artistic flourishes outside of the perceived people and scenery. If a poet involved him/herself personally with people in an observed environment, then the work would produce biased and misperceived representations of a culture. In ethnography, creative accounts were invalid. However, as Sean Heuston notes, using Clifford's observations of ethnographic theory, a poet may divert from these traditional viewpoints of ethnography and find that "ethnographic accounts are always already partial and creative" (63). Therefore, the representations of a culture stem from a poet's point of view. Such perceptions might range from the eye of an observer to the perspective of one or more members of a culture. Clifford argues, "Ethnographic texts are orchestrations of multivocal exchanges. The subjectivities produced in these often unequal exchanges . . . are constructed domains of truth, serious fiction" (qtd. in Heuston 63). Presenting ethnographic verse with different

perspectives gives readers a more detailed representation of a community, ranging from the attitudes and customs to the hardships and joys of that community's population.

In a narrative in verse, a poet may create a speaker that observes a community, but he or she sees not just through his or her own eyes but also through the eyes of the community members. Understanding the perspectives of different people becomes essential in ethnographic verse because the poet creates a detailed world that appears authentic to readers. A poet of ethnographic verse strives for this inclusion of different viewpoints. Concerning this detailed and inclusive portrayal of a community, Carl Dennis, in his book *Poetry as Persuasion*, states, "Though inclusiveness involves avoiding too narrow or too private a treatment of the subject . . . it entails attempting to connect a wide range of apparently unrelated elements. The inclusive speaker presents himself as a seeker of unity amid diversity" (32). A poet of ethnographic verse makes his or her own authority based on the unification of seemingly disparate subjects presented in a community. Authority through this supposed authenticity is apparent when a poet of ethnographic verse attempts to see past differences and find common ground amidst conflict that stems from political, religious, social, and/or economic factors.

A poet creates a community for readers when he or she acknowledges the diversity within a given culture. A poet's ideals otherwise may get in the way of inclusiveness. Addressing this issue, Dennis states, "Poets should be able to write about all that interests them, and if their interests do not engage them deeply and widely in contemporary life, their poetry is likely to be thin" (33). Complexities of a

community are lost if an ethnographic poet disregards other points of view. On these complexities, Clare Madge states, "Poetry has potential to give insight in the multiple (sometimes painful) realities of life—not some emotionally flattened version" (181). The complex emotions a poet of ethnographic verse has for a place, like a hometown, have no emotional impact for readers, if that poet fails to get inside the minds of the people he or she represents in his or her work.

Rhetorically, inclusion in poetry does not just come from a poet's ability to understand a subject, but it also comes from the ground that both the poet and the subject walk on. A poet of ethnographic verse uses the range of a geographical terrain to accommodate his or her expansive look at a community's inhabitants. Bonnie Costello, in her book *Shifting Ground*, notes this method in her look at geography as a means of inclusion: "structure of landscape retains an opposition between mastering spectator and expansive scene that masks [human] involvement in what we view, that makes parts seem to be wholes" (8). Everything framed in a certain territory, like a small town or big city, is one, an entire entity that gives readers a sense of a place's own character. Imagery can give meaning to a location in a work of ethnographic verse. Costello further states, "[Poets'] activity in giving shape and meaning to nature puts us in touch with the fluency of the universe even as one invention becomes the casualty of another. This rhythm of our interacting, sometimes contending metaphors . . . is often represented as part of the broader evolutionary course of nature" (8). Establishing a unified community may stem from the poet's ability to use a place's geography as a framing device that brings everyone together. While that geography may serve as a metaphor for unification, it can also

become a metaphor for desertion. The environment then changes to match the changing times in a location. For example, erosion of the soil and dried earth may represent the barren and deserted feelings a character experiences when passing through a quiet town. No more are there people or lush green fields; what is left is the silence of a forgotten community.

Such desertion contributes to another role geography might play in ethnographic verse: the sense of "otherness" that is not like any other place in the world. In an analysis of Robert Frost's work, William Doreski states that use of place is a criticism of the self "where rural or wilderness landscapes occupy significant roles in which nature, scarred by human use and abuse, functions as a trope of otherness, repelling the poet's dogged queries and offering . . . a mute rhetoric of nonhuman forms" (1). A poet of ethnographic verse might feature a speaker seeking answers in another place that seems particularly cut off from the rest of civilization, like the woods or in some small town miles away from the big cities, but that place has no clear answers of the self's meaning for that speaker. This speaker does not find elation or satisfaction in this other place because troubles still materialize within a geographic terrain the character traverses. Because the speaker resides in this place of "otherness," he or she discovers feelings of loneliness, reflection, and identification with a place and its people.

A place then becomes part of a speaker's existential conflict in his or her representative feelings about a location and the people in it. How can this speaker inhabit a certain place when there is so much pain and sorrow brought on by human activity? For Siobhan Phillips, in *The Poetics of the Everyday*, the incorporation of

serious issues like politics, spirituality, and personal hardships address the reasons for existing in the world as well as poetry's conflicting relationship between politics and history (199). Phillips further notes that such differences in these topics prepare the way for individualism: "This verse would not examine the ordinary stuff that a given society contains so much as imagine the ordinary life that a given individual creates" (200). Amidst the challenges a place poses, the speaker in an ethnographic poetic narrative creates his or her own identity through the personal choices he or she makes. Through these choices, a speaker finds meaning not just from a place but also from the daily activities he or she witnesses or experiences in a place.

Ethnographic verse is poetry that engages to find meaning between people and their relationship to place. It seeks expansion from a poet's self (whether through a character or not) to the selves of the community members. In doing so, a poet of ethnographic verse strives for effective representations of a community. Place in a narrative in verse works to bring the speaker and the characters around that speaker together. At the end of this poet's narrative, the speaker reaches an empathetic connection with the people in this given place.

Empathetic Connections Between the Poet and the Subject

In the context of this study of ethnographic verse, empathy is when the poet (through the speaker) understands the feelings of the subject(s). The speaker in the narrative analyzes the characters and their lives. That speaker may note the characters' emotions or engage in a conversation with these characters. Other times,

the speaker lets the characters speak, either through dialogue or in their own poems outside of the speaker's voice. All of these instances are moments of reflection for the character, where he or she processes the community members' feelings of loss and encouragement and how those people's feelings relate to his or her own life. By applying each person's dilemma to the core existential dilemma throughout this narrative, the speaker grows from these different perspectives and is willing to adapt to the changing times of the world. If that speaker can do so, then he or she does so through bringing into harmony the forces of the past and the present.

Unifying the poet's speaker and the subject, as well as the past and the present, is the empathy that ethnographic verse wishes to create. The first step of this unification may come from the speaker's ability to go beyond his/herself throughout the narrative in verse. Dennis states, "Most poems in the first person avoid solipsism not only by incorporating some self-critical distance but by expanding the subject matter of the poem beyond the self" (54). Dennis shows how this expansion works. He examines the work of Emily Dickinson, finding evident ways of the poet going beyond the self when she discusses her broader, more inclusive themes about human existence. For example, Dickinson's poem "Last Words" revolves around the first-person speaker dying and thinking about the afterlife. The dying speaker wonders if she will be viewed as significant to the unborn population of the world that stumble upon her remains. She finds comfort not from a spiritual concept but from secular items like surrounding pots that sit at her side as she dies. As Dennis observes, a poet like Dickinson writes from the self but she "turn[s] first-person isolation into a badge of insight about the human

condition" (56). Dickinson speaks from the self, but she still exerts more outward ideas about humanity and the connections everyone shares, both living and dead.

Besides empathetic gestures toward the living and the dead, poets may also create inclusive themes about the past and the present. A poet of ethnographic verse can use the voice of an historic figure that examines the people and places of the past and how they compare to the present. With this technique, the poet represents the historic figure as a character, empathizing with this figure's struggles during harsh and changing times in a certain place or places. Margaret Atwood provides a striking example of this method with her poetry collection *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970). The effect of Atwood creating a persona for her book brings the reader and the subject, as well as that subject's history, closer together. In this collection, divided up into three journals, the character of Susanna Moodie highlights various hardships she endured when her family made the transition from city to country life in Canada. Atwood indicates the likely isolation her titular character must have felt on her way to Quebec. The first poem from Journal One, "Disembarking at Quebec," captures such sentiments with lines like "this space cannot hear" (ll. 5), "these vistas of desolation" (ll. 8), and "moving water [that] will not show me / my reflection" (ll. 16-17). Through dialect and imagery, Atwood gives readers a clear look at the anxiety Moodie underwent in her transition to life in the wild. To seal that feeling of alienation, Atwood concludes with the following line: "I am a word / in a foreign language" (ll. 19-20). Tension is set for the remainder of *Journals*, as Moodie figures out how to adapt to her new life. She brings the past and the present together through this tension. Therefore, the word usage in the titular

journals appeals to empathy from the reader, as the reader gets a sense of Moodie's struggles and how emotionally stressful they were for her.

In the concluding poem of *Journals*, Atwood's poetry makes the duel between the past and the present evident. Here, Moodie's character makes more insightful social statements. "A Bus Along St. Clair: December" represents an elderly Moodie's final thoughts as she observes the spreading urban civilization. The changes anger her. Though the woods she lived in are gone, she insists she cannot be buried under the modern era's wish to establish a "silver paradise with a bulldozer" (ll. 11). What follows is the opposite of her feelings about country life in "Disembarking at Quebec": "Turn, look down: / there is no city; / this is the centre of a forest / your place is empty" (ll. 28-31). Moodie has become the ghost of a past almost nonexistent because of the spreading urbanization across the nation; she is left behind and forgotten for the sake of progress. The end of Atwood's collection thus shows some similarities to the purposes of ethnographic verse, where it reflects on the character's place in the world and what significance she has left when big cities expand and the country is gone.

Based on these examples from Atwood and Dickinson, a poet of ethnographic verse can elicit empathy in his or her readers through connections with others, both living and dead and from the past and present. In ethnographic verse, poets might seek common ground between a poetic narrative's speaker and the subject through unifying imagery, dialect that represents a place's customs and attitudes, and supernatural/spiritual motifs. Building these connections is a prominent focus in both classic and modern works of poetry, which I will explore.

Unity Through Imagery

Unifying imagery is a tool poets of ethnographic verse may use for the possibility of establishing empathy between characters in a narrative in verse; it does not mean that finding empathy is the sole—or initial—intent of the poet's imagery. Although classic poets like Walt Whitman and Robert Frost are not ethnographic poets, their work nonetheless has parallels with the characteristics of ethnographic verse already mentioned. A reader may see these parallels and how useful such tools of ethnographic verse have been for classic poets. Looking at Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), readers might see the effect Whitman's verses have in linking individuals together within a certain location.

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* promotes empathy for readers with universal imagery like the titular grass that grows across America. For Whitman, incorporating imagery in individual poems while relating it to the bigger work that is *Leaves of Grass* is a bigger challenge. To accomplish the sense of wholeness in Whitman's nationalistic poetry, a consistent image (or symbol) is needed. The leaves of grass, according to Karen Karbiener, act "as a symbol of American democracy. Simple and universal, grass represents common ground. Each leaf (Whitman thought the proper word 'blade' was literally too sharp) has a singular identity yet is a necessary contributor to the whole" (xxxv). The softness of the word "leaf" and the universal "common ground" of grass both set up feelings of warm welcomes and equality. Whitman uses the grass as a way to show that, despite the differences people have with each other, they share the same land and therefore should share

the same rights. This effective global image of the grass accomplishes the widespread democratic community Whitman explores in *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman makes the connection between symbol and community evident early in the first poem of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "Song of Myself." After lengthy personal reflections, Whitman begins to talk about the grass:

> Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
> And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow
> zones,
> Growing among black folks as among white,
> Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same,
> I receive them the same. (33-34)

In only a few lines, Whitman signifies the unifying power of grass growing throughout the nation. Indicating that the grass raises "among black folks as among white" stresses similarities between people despite their ethnicities so important in a democratic community. The grass represents the "this land is your land, this land is my land" notion that began to grow during the abolition of slavery.

Adding to the sense of equality of life with the image of grass, Whitman also uses grass to represent equality of death. He continues:

> Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
> It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
> It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;
> It may be you are from old people and from women, and from
> offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,

And here you are the mothers' laps. (34)

In both life and death, Whitman uses grass to unify a community and for him to become one with that community. James E. Miller, Jr., in his analysis of *Leaves of Grass*, states, "[Whitman realizes] that his work embodies seemingly opposing views: his idea of democracy holds in tension both individuality and 'En-Masse'; his notion of self embraces both physicality and spirituality; his identity as an American includes both national and international dimensions" (9-10). Though he as the speaker may only function as an observer of the nation and the population's actions within it, readers can interpret the grass as this unifying image that brings everyone in the world together.

In addition to the symbol of the grass, Frost captures the quiet images of farm life in rural New England. He creates images that blur the lines between observer and subject. Frost's poetry carries the consistent image of the working farmer, forever persevering to make a life out in a wooded rural landscape. For Frost's poetry, a reader might feel empathy for a farmer's isolation out in the woods or lonely rural landscapes. *A Boy's Will* (1915) has some comparisons to ethnographic verse by the impression that Frost represents farm life and the isolated life that comes with it. In his observations of Frost's poems, Terence Diggory states how effectively Frost "transform[s] the speaker from the mere voice of a poem to a character in a continued romance. Endowed with this fuller life, the speaker approaches more nearly the poet himself, whose consciousness is the real unifying force in the poems" (68). The romance in Frost's poetry revolves around freedom and hard work, but more importantly individuality. The titular speaker moves out

into the wilderness, far away from society, just so he can become his own man. Throughout the narrative, though, the speaker notices the stillness of the woods and the quietness of solitude. By putting his speaker in this situation, Frost creates a loosely constructed story that lets the reader feel empathy for the speaker.

Empathy may emerge from imagery and insight, as one may interpret from Frost's work. In the poem "Mowing," Frost creates a speaker that puts readers in the mindset of a farmer. Frost starts his poem with the following lines: "There was never a sound beside the wood but one, / And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground" (ll. 1-2). Already, Frost puts the reader in this quiet state of mind evoked by the solitary image of a lone farmer in the woods. Using the first-person word "my," the reader may empathize with the positive feeling of individualism the farmer has from the duty of mowing. Frost concludes: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows. / My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make" (ll. 13-14). Aside from the first-person perspective, Frost states how this farmer might feel as he works: "It was no dream of the gift of idle hours, / Or, easy gold at the hand of fay or elf: / Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak / To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows" (ll. 7-10). Frost appeals to empathy through his descriptions of the farmer's feelings. Commenting on this empathetic gesture that Frost demonstrates by getting in the mind of his character, John Kemp believes that Frost's goal is "to dramatize the personal engagement of a regional character in a specific, rustic activity" (qtd. in Heuston 64). In addition to that empathetic insight, Frost's work can be described as ethnographic verse because of his authoritative attention to detail. Descriptions like "the swale in rows," feeble-

pointed spikes of flowers / [Pale orchises], and a frightened bright green snake" (ll. 10-12) are rich details that places a poet and a reader directly in the scene framed within the poem.

In a more melancholic sense, *A Boy's Will* also shows elements of ethnographic verse because of the setting's sense of "otherness" that differentiates itself from society. The speaker in *A Boy's Will* is isolated from everybody else, and the woods then also serve as part of the main existential conflict for him. Frank Lentricchia, in his book *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self*, states that the main conflict in *A Boy's Will* is an individual fighting against society and seeking isolation. The image of the woods both separates and unites the boy and society. The woods give the boy his space, but at the same time they will make the boy think back to the necessity of company (26). Lentricchia's observations tie into the common theme of unification in ethnographic verse. A speaker in a narrative in verse may seek individualism; however, that speaker, like the one in *A Boy's Will*, might find that an entire community matters more than the self.

Frost's *A Boy's Will* presents an overarching narrative concerned with the internal conflict of a person seeking reclusion and eventually longing for inclusion in a community once more. In the second poem "Into My Own," the speaker longs to escape into the woods as a reckless wish to leave society behind. With the next poem "Ghost House," the speaker experiences the emotional emptiness living alone, away from everyone else. Frost's speaker notes having a "strangely aching heart" for the deserted house in the woods (6). By the house, the speaker finds "stones out under the low-limbed tree" with "tireless folk [that are] slow and sad" (7). The spirits around the Ghost House

represent the despair that comes with solitude, their memories forgotten just like the home nearby. After a series of trials living in the woods, the speaker decides to rejoin society in the poem "Reluctance." Though the speaker's "heart is still aching to seek," he comes to the conclusion that it is fine to "go with the drift of things" (22). While the longing for adventure is natural for him, the narrator comes to appreciate society more after his time alone and with the spirits in the woods.

A Community's Identifiable Dialect and Its Significance

Ethnographic verse should create a realistic dialect for a given community because it makes a narrative in verse more grounded. Otherwise, a heavily stylized form of verse appears unrealistic and inconsistent when comparing it to a small town rural community the poet portrays in a narrative. When a poet uses direct language, that poet leans toward a type of performance that ties in with a society (Spargo 57). This performance is one way for a poet to blend in with others in an analyzed community. Like an ethnographer, the poet takes in the actions and speech patterns of a group of people and records those mannerisms and phrases but in verse form.

Frost did this in his own poetry, especially in narrative poems like "The Death of the Hired Man." In this poem, Frost's descriptions of rural people are personable and relatable to the community's overall character. The language is straightforward and serves as an indicator of cultural attitudes that differ from non-rural areas. Frost acts as a stenographer, writing a transcript of what a farm couple says about their elderly workhand Silas who is currently declining in health. During

the conversation, Mary tells Warren about Silas's wish to teach the former workhand Harold Wilson, a recent college graduate, how to pitch hay. Mary uses a term like "college boy" (27) when referring to Harold and reasons that, if Silas taught Harold about haying, then he would finally feel like he did "[s]ome good . . . to someone in the world" (28). To the characters in "The Death of the Hired Man," life outside the farm does not have any practical use. For someone like Silas, who believes college makes one "the fool of books" (28), farm duties are all one needs in order to feel fulfilled. Such dialogue captures the rural character, and Frost does well to avoid stylized verse because it would deter from the straightforward, no-nonsense spirit Silas has towards literature and life.

More contemporary poets follow Frost's example and create realistic dialogue related to a community. Jim Reese, in his poem "Understanding Animals—A Primer," as part of his collection *These Trespasses* (2005), reveals a rural spirit. Reese lists different terms for cattle and relates these terms to the descriptions of people in a town. For the term *bucket calf*, one of Reese's definitions is a "[m]otherless calf" (ll. 13), while another definition is "[s]omeone from the city who looks lost in the / country" (ll. 14-15). Like Frost, Reese emphasizes that the rural community is a different world compared to the sprawling cities. The more rugged life in the country could lead to more crude phrases, as evident with Reese's use of the phrase (supposedly by some fictional character) "as worthless as teats on a / boar" (ll. 54-55). This cliché adds to the country character that Reese establishes in his poetry.

Adding to the grounded depictions of a rural community, dialect could also preserve memories of overlooked or forgotten pasts. According to R. Clifton Spargo, commonplace phrases are cliché, but they relate to the past. A clichéd phrase "bears the markings of a defunct or nostalgic performative, in which the binding force of conventionality has been so long taken for granted as to have been forgotten" (57-58). Using conventional patterns of speech does not make for flat poetry; adapting those phrases makes a poet's subject more identifiable and relatable. A community's language lets readers see into the personal lives of rural people, showing the readers a community's prosperity and hardships through repeated phrases.

Capturing such hardships is evident in Ron Rash's poetry collection *Raising the Dead* (2002). Throughout this collection, Rash represents a people who have lost their land due to the damaging effects of a dam project spreading through a North Carolina town. Rash aims to bring back those lost people and pieces of memory related to the land. In "Barn Burning: 1967," Rash tells the story of a farmer who has lost part of his property, and the memory of that lost barn haunts the farmer through photographs, "as if the camera captured / flame forever on that farm" (ll. 11-12). Rash records the scene in third-person, noting the phrase his uncle often said: *"A man who gets through a time / mean as that need not have fears / of something worse*" (ll. 26-28). Having the uncle repeatedly say this phrase makes such a quote a cliché, but it serves a rhetorical purpose in the poem. Spargo states, "[People of a community] are provoked always by a question as to whether the words or phrases being summoned have any surviving force, whether they can still be interpreted as binding" (60). A reader may have this impression of the uncle's

clichéd phrase, as it seems to hold on to a distant past. As time progresses, it becomes a question of whether or not those phrases can have any substantial meaning for future generations or if they are just products of the past and nothing more.

Letting the past known to the present is the poet's way of honoring the history of a people. Rash raises the dead of a forgotten North Carolina town, Reese captures common expressions found in the country, and Frost presents a people's attitudes through dialect. Once these poets linger in nostalgia, for good or bad, they literally or metaphorically let a dead society known to the public.

The Poet and the Dead

Ghosts and other elements of the supernatural can help a poet obtain the essence of a place long forgotten. Poetic techniques regarding death transcend from the physical to metaphysical plane. Using the supernatural in poetry, a poet can reveal different perspectives of the truth about a community. According to Ross Clarkson, "Ghosts are those beings who will never close the gap between the past and the present. This condition corresponds to the living whose own past somehow survives 'outside the present,' and so there is a sense in which the living 'can survive only outside himself'" (par. 9). For poet Jack Spicer, whose work Clarkson analyzes, the living must share their limited existence with each other. The living can do the same with the dead and the dead correspond with one another. This latter case is similar to the dialogue in Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. By sharing experiences, both the living and the dead make the past and the present mingle with each other.

These ghostly subjects are another way for a poet of ethnographic verse to analyze a community, since they let a poet depict stories of people after death. Edgar Lee Masters, in *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), draws upon experiences from the dead through the confined space and consistent imagery of a graveyard, which becomes a small neighborhood for the ghosts of a fictional town. Masters shows signs of ethnographic verse through his authoritative voice that explores the personal feelings of the dead buried in this cemetery. Whether or not they were real people, the dead people in *Spoon River Anthology* seem real because of the complex relationships Masters gives them.

Such complexity creates empathy in Masters's subjects because each dead person may share similar feelings of loneliness, regret, or failure that then appeal to readers' empathy. In the testimonies by the dead Albert Schirding and Jonas Keene, the reader sees two different outlooks on failure and success. With the poem "Albert Schirding," the titular character thinks he is worse off than Jonas Keene, when the latter thinks his life a loss because his "children were all failures" (ll. 2). Schirding says, "But I know of a fate more trying than that: / It is to be a failure while your children are successes" (ll. 3-4). He laments how much better off, supposedly, his children are without him, and so he decides to run for County Superintendent to gain his children's love. Schirding loses, while his daughter wins a prize for a picture of a mill, thus concluding, "The feeling that I was not worthy of her finished me" (ll. 15). Conversely, in the poem "Jonas Keene," Keene thinks Schirding wasted a good life by killing himself, stating, "Blest as he was with the means of life / And wonderful children, bringing him honor" (ll. 3-4). Keene grieves that his own

children have not amounted to anything, prompting him to make himself sick and refuse medical care. In the end, each man has his own idea of failure, but they have similar feelings of despair that lead them both to the grave. Now they stay together in the cemetery, along with the rest of the woeful dead.

Because of his unifying imagery of the graveyard, Masters can create a dialogue between the ghosts in an observed community, which appeals to readers' empathy. Masters's characters of the ghosts provide engaging insight about each other through this dialogue. This becomes another basis for modern ethnographic verse. According to Katie Fitzpatrick, poetry allows for subjectivity because poetic form encourages creativity (12). From her research, Fitzpatrick furthers the idea that poetry helps us better understand a culture when observed "within wider societal hierarchies or structures" (12). Masters analyzes social hierarchies based on the levels of failure between Schirding and Keene, in order to create a better understanding of what it means to fail a family. Regardless of which hierarchy these men fall in, they are united in Masters's imagistic cemetery, indicating that, in death, the men are the same.

Since the dead can correspond with the living, and the speaker in a poetic narrative observes a community of the dead in a given location, ethnographic verse may benefit from these fictional elements because they still are used to represent a specific place and the people in it. In his study of Wallace Stevens's implementation of supernatural elements in poetry, L.S. Dembo notes that observing is still the crucial part to a poem's aesthetic (81). Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* plays on Stevens's rule, having a speaker in a narrative observe and record multiple subjects'

raw feelings through confessions of failure and despair. Throughout the anthology, one person's opinion of someone differs from another person's opinion, as noted in the relationship between Keene and Schirding. Being ghosts does not stop Keene and Schirding's words from having any truth in Masters's poetry, for Masters gives the reader the stance of a third-person observer, merely listening in on a couple of townspeople's woes.

A recording of such despair in Masters's and other modern poets' work embodies the idea of representing the forgotten past through ghosts. While imagery and dialect help convey a sense of nostalgia, ghosts and hauntings generally unveil a darker side to history. A poem related to haunted places "questions the legacies of historical figures and repositions them within new poetic constructs that reveal history's wounds while working toward more sustainable interpretations of past practices" (Watts 108). A work like Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* informs readers about misinterpretations of historical events or to acknowledge different viewpoints.

An ethnographic poet may broaden a reader's understanding of a certain place through the use of ghosts or such forces, emphasizing that the past is indeed buried or oppressed, as is the case with Joy Harjo's poem "New Orleans." Harjo begins her poem like so: "This is the south. I look for evidence / of other Creeks, for remnants of voices" (ll. 1-2). The speaker in Harjo's poem records the wails of the spiritual voices long lost overtime. The tone of the first two lines in her poem accentuates changing times, but those changes cannot completely erase the ghosts of the past. A few stanzas down, Harjo's poem grows grimmer: "I have a memory. /

It swims deep in blood, / a delta in the skin. It swims out of Oklahoma, / deep the Mississippi River" (ll. 21-24). Harjo's otherwise unrealistic subject gains more validity in her precise location of these hauntings. At this point, the dead begin to rise from the Mississippi River, and Harjo begins to tell their story.

Over the course of the story in Harjo's ethnographic verse, historical facts and concrete details make the supernatural element more credible. She references Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto and mourns the fact that, since the arrival of the Spanish, the Creek civilization disappeared:

> . . . I have seen New Orleans,
> the lace and silk buildings,
> trolley cars on beaten silver paths,
> graves that rise up out of soft earth in the rain,
> shops that sell black mammy dolls
> holding white babies. (ll. 62-67)

Harjo shows the dramatic changes that have taken place. Gone are the "earth towns" (ll. 51) Harjo describes from the Creeks' early civilization. In the place of those towns, Harjo shows the reader a much more urban cityscape. Tension runs throughout the poem between the ghosts of the past and the products of the present. The past always keeps fighting that it is not gone, but the present says otherwise. Emphasizing that tension, Harjo concludes her poem with these lines:

> And I know I have seen De Soto,
> having a drink on Bourbon Street,
> mad and crazy

dancing with a woman as gold

as the river bottom.

In this dance, Harjo offers some faint hope that the past is not gone, as De Soto (the cause of the present conditions burying the Creek culture) finally "embraces the indigenous population for its true wealth" (Watts 123). Both the supernatural world and the natural world co-exist with the dance between de Soto and the woman at the river bottom. Tracey Watts, in her analysis of "New Orleans," suggests that the river gives Harjo the opportunity "to mourn the decimation of the Creek tribes and to suggest a future of revitalization of the Creek community . . ." (122). Her image of the dance between de Soto and the woman in the river suggests the possible recognition and reemergence of the past, but it nevertheless remains submerged at the bottom of the river for now.

Tension between the living and the dead correlates with ethnographic verse because it unifies the characters in the narrative. Ernest Smith, in his study of the spirituality in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, observes the relationship between the living and the dead even in sleep. From Whitman's "The Sleepers," Smith states, the dream state makes both life and death one entity as a way to "compensate for past losses and sufferings" (235). As a community, like what happens in Harjo's "New Orleans," the townspeople are all remembered in some way, whether they are in the grave or not. This inclusion is another empathetic gesture that does not bar a deceased individual from the poetic treatment faced by a living person.

Rash captures this empathy between the living and the dead in another poem entitled "Black-Eyed Susans." The poem centers on a farmer whose land is close to a

cemetery. Memorials at the cemetery (flowers, crosses, etc.) blow onto his land, and the farmer puts them back in the cemetery. On the day that this poem takes place, he finds the black-eyed Susans with "a note / tight-folded tied to a bow. / *Always* was all that it said" (ll. 18-20). The farmer knows whom this belongs to and sets the flowers and note near the grave of a former lover, who fell in love with someone else. For the latter half of the poem, the farmer has bitter feelings, going so far as thinking of digging up the rival man at his former lover's side and hanging "his bones up on the fence / like a varmint" (ll. 49-50). At the end, the farmer realizes how vile such an act is and puts the black-eyed Susans on his former lover's grave and a few on the rival's. The farmer reasons that "soon enough we'll all be / sleeping together, beyond / all things that ever mattered" (ll. 67-69). With this statement, Rash's character's thoughts complement the unifying notions of life and death in Whitman's work. No longer is there bitterness in the farmer's reflection of his lost lover because he realizes, though she is gone, she is still in some way a part of his life and of the community as a whole. Such a concluding sentiment, though, does not feel fake because the setting is still rooted in the North Carolina community set up in *Raising the Dead*, where so much loss takes place already. This poem is Rash's way of seeing the positive behind that loss that resides in the town.

Spirits play an even larger role in Frost's poetry with the *New Hampshire* selection "The Census-Taker." In this poem, the speaker comes to an abandoned house, only to find no one inside. To make up for the lack of people, the Census-taker imagines what life must have been like for the former inhabitants of the house; his imagination creates ghostly images of people who materialize and dissipate right before his eyes. At

the end of the poem, explaining his imagination, the Census-taker states, "It must be I want life to go on living" (112). Much like the narrator in *A Boy's Will*, the Census-taker in *New Hampshire* appreciates life after seeing the despair that comes with the loss of it.

Given the examples above, metaphysical issues ironically breathe more life into the physical world, giving readers a better sense of the issues, conflicts, and customs of a people. But while metaphysical entities, imagery, and dialects can represent a community, then what do those elements say about the poet's speaker in relation to a culture?

The Speaker of a Narrative in Verse

A speaker in a narrative in verse is the mediator between the living and the dead, the past and the present, while in a specific place. This speaker observes and records the environments around him or her in an attempt to understand the importance of a place to that speaker. People and settings can create a relationship with the speaker, bringing back good and bad memories. The supernatural elements may serve as reflections of a speaker's thoughts, as he or she makes sense of the world. When the speaker interacts with the supernatural, a conflict with the past and the present ensues. Regarding the significance of supernatural forces, Devin Johnston states, "If the self can be thought of as a haunted house, it bears a close resemblance to the literal household. . . . Here, the haunting prepares us for a reciprocity between world and mind, past and present" (16). The speaker in a poetic narrative helps bridge the gap between nostalgia and present existence, bitter

memories and hopeful futures, and reflection and growth. A sense of a speaker's self is then the product of every element discussed thus far about ethnographic verse.

Outside of the supernatural, some poets writing about nature and community have come to a conclusive sense of identity. For Whitman, the speaker in *Leaves of Grass* seeks a unified identity with everyone in the world, where he does not discriminate against different groups of people. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, the speaker considers himself one with everybody ("Song of Myself," "The Sleepers"). With other poets, however, their relationship with nature fuels a more personal journey of self-discovery. Concerning this self-discovery through nature, Susan Clayton states how most people "overlook the impact of nonsocial (or at least nonhuman) objects in defining identity . . . there are clearly many people for whom an important aspect of their identity lies in ties to the natural world: connections to specific natural objects such as pets, trees, mountain formations, or particular geographic locations" (qtd. in Mthatiwa 72). Being surrounded by nature liberates the poet's speaker, as that speaker tries to figure out his or her identity in a narrative in verse. The people and places that the narrative's speaker once knew help the speaker connect with the community. A speaker may go back to his or her childhood home, a park, or a forest that bring back memories and seek to build a relationship with the narrative's characters. In the end, while the speaker may seek individualism, he or she discovers that his or her own identity forms from the people in a community. The speaker's self is then part of a greater whole.

The narrative of *A Boy's Will* by Frost portrays how society shapes the self. One natural object Frost always implements in his imagery is the forest. His

prominent use of trees acts as a barrier between the speaker and the community left behind. As shown in "Into My Own," the speaker conveys determined recklessness: "I should not be withheld but that some day / Into their vastness I should steal away, / Fearless of ever finding open land, / Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand" (ll. 5-8). The speaker does not ever want to return to society and feels as though living alone in the woods is thrilling. This begins to establish tension between the poet's self and society.

Doubt about the self is evident in the poet at the start of the next poem, "Ghost House." The poet starts:

I dwell in a lonely house I know
That vanished many a summer ago,
And left no trace but the cellar walls,
And a cellar in which the daylight falls,
And the purple-stemmed wild raspberries grow. (ll. 1-5)

With this imagery, Frost juxtaposes an abandoned past with the growing present realized in nature. In the context of *A Boy's Will*, the speaker inhabits a nonexistent hovel that symbolizes the last remaining touch he has with civilization. Though walls surround him, the speaker has no roof, no shelter to guard him from the wilderness. He notices stones that share "the unlit place" (ll. 23-24) with him and thinks that those people of the stones might make "sweet companions" (ll. 30). Between this and "Into My Own," the speaker makes up natural fantasies and the woods are the symbol of his own dark inner conflict (Lentricchia 28). The speaker's dreams of individualism in *A Boy's Will* are the likely cause of "damnation—it is

psychological death-force as well as life-force, since it alone creates our private hells" (Lentricchia 28-29). Furthering the idea of the destructive path for self-discovery, Lentricchia states, "The quest for self-identity . . . appears to necessitate, for the self in the poem, radical severance from the human community and immersion in darkness. Ultimately . . . the journey into the immense dark wood becomes a metaphor for a journey into interior space . . . which will finally stimulate . . . the need for community" (26). The speaker needs separation from society in order to critically think about his or her own place in the world, and that person can achieve that because he or she immerses him- or herself with the forces of both life and death. Acknowledging the entities found in both life and death, the speaker finds that he or she can eventually move on to become a member of society again.

Unity between the speaker's self and society appears in Frost's final poem of *A Boy's Will*, "Reluctance." Fall has come and the leaves are gone, and at this point, the speaker begins to wonder what else is left for him in the woods now that it is bare. At the end of the poem, the speaker decides to "go with the drift of things, / To yield with a grace to reason, / And bow and accept the end / Of a love or a season?" (ll. 21-24). Here, the speaker has reached "the highway home" (ll. 5) and decides that there is no harm in returning to society. He feels fulfilled with his endeavors in the wilderness, having time to contemplate who he is, and now he can be one with the rest of the community. The growth of his self-identity thus comes full circle.

From these examples, ethnographic verse is an important form of poetry in shaping the speaker of a place in terms of his or her self-identity. Many elements like unifying imagery, culturally binding dialect, surrealist historical details, and

reflections of physical and metaphysical elements can capture the spirit of a community. In the end, a poet of ethnographic verse manages to create an identity for a place and the people in it. The poet then reflects on the significance of that identity in the broad picture of the world. The next chapter contains original compositions influenced by the aforementioned theories of ethnography and ethnographic verse.

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Chapter Two: A Medium in a Ghost Town

Carnival of '07

I turned the corner onto Main Street
and crossed into the past.
Where there had been shattered streetlights,
empty store windows, and faded graffitied roads,
there appeared tilt-o'-whirls,
mini-roller coasters, and merry-go-rounds
between the weed-grown sidewalks.

Laughter echoed
through the stark blue sky. Unseen feet
kicked up gravel. *Thunk*
baseball against a bat
and then I saw all the people I left behind.

Folks laughed and danced inside Ida's Café,
moms and children ate rolls at my old babysitter's booth,
and my friends shattered records at the batting cage.
The gears turned for the dragon coaster and tilt-o'-whirl,
and people screamed in delight.
My dad's face beamed at the jet black Conquest
at the car show.
My ailing grandpa had a childlike grin,
so happy for this summer. His last summer.
At the alley between the hair salon and Ship's Inn,
my best friend Marc got drunk and hung upside down
trying to climb the Spider-Man jungle gym.

Couples held hands
under the golden lights of the merry-go-round.
Tricia and her boyfriend kissed under the gazebo
while a marching band and school chorus performed on the lawn,
and there my first crush sang her first solo.
All were bright memories basked in shadow at sunset,
and families watched the fireworks explode and fizzle
like the events of that last centennial.

Now I behold a barren road.
Passing the dusty window of the heritage museum,
I see a faded picture-postcard of the cityscape:
"Wishing You Were Here
at the Carnival of '07."

Ghost Café

A café's brick façade contrasts
with the darkness inside. Windows
to nothing. Blue-and-beige patterned tiles
lie coated in dust, once a sparkling
dance floor.

Gone are the waltzing couples spinning near the front windows,
the jukebox music blasting through the cracks of the front door.
Gone is the laughter and off-key singing.

Tables and chairs once filled
with families, now a gap
between blank surfaces.

Gone are the elderly playing card games,
the middle-aged complaining of bald spots and muffin tops.
Gone are the teenagers lunching, serving dirty jokes.

Newspaper clippings now stripped
off walls, square outlines remain etched
on white canvas.

Gone are printed records and faded photographs,
the stack of boxes hauling articles and Langenfeld family signs away.
Gone is the woman hanging up the sign OUT OF BUSINESS.

A forgotten article rests, buried
in a far-off corner, under layers of dust,
with an epitaph:

"Nothing Quite Like Ida's."

The Stage Lights of Our Lives

My friends and I stood backstage in the shadows,
anticipating our time in the spotlight,
to step out onstage, all worries fading away.
Applause welcomed painted-up characters
who were just pale loners and outcasts,
Midwestern misfits
who sang, strummed, and drummed
in drafty garages on fall evenings.
To stand tall on a flatbed at each other's side.

A guitar riff shrieked through the violet sky,
the crowd stomped in time to the pound of drums.
The singer belted out notes of a song
and jumped along with the throng on the street.
The synthesizer keys at my fingertips,
a tune in my head
even after everyone in the band was gone.

We were small town dreamers that wrote and played
all day, every song coming to us
on every cracked sidewalk and empty lot.
Ready for that moment:
a night's performance under the swirling lights
of summer carnival rides and neon signs;
these were the stage lights of our lives.

Serenity Creek

I walked through my backyard, passed a line of evergreens,
and found myself at a creek I hadn't seen
since I was a kid.

Summer months used to show clear shimmering streams.
Schools of fish swam in golden teams, and a fat muskrat
floated on its back to beat the afternoon heat.

My friends and I took nets and buckets to fish
for crawdads, and frogs leapt on lily pads. My friends laughed
as I jumped at a bullfrog; I could've given a damn.

The waterbed still snakes between a couple peninsulas,
now filled with litter, algae, and cattle waste—
a muddled reflection of the lonely wildlife.

A crane skims the soiled stream on white-sailed wings,
gliding up over bare trees, away from a mother robin
who sings for her baby to spring out of the nest

and fly away with her. But the baby flits
through branches and around trunks, on a search
for the morning worm. The mother follows,

her and her baby engulfed
in the blades of the overgrown grass.

Falling Out of Line

My grandpa owned a John Deere mower.
He spent an entire afternoon
cutting circles around evergreens,
snipping corners near the house.
His hands familiar with the throttle and levers,
he sped back and forth in ditches and fields,
lowering or raising the muddied yellow mower below
when on flat ground.

In spring, he loved the breeze brushing
across his face, perfumed wafts of apple blossoms,
his Pug Buddy sitting on his lap.
During summer droughts, the bill of his Wheelco cap
shaded his eyes, a tan line branding
a perspiring neck.
Underneath chilled clouds, layers of flannel
shielded already prickling skin.
He and the mower still going.

Twelve years old at the time,
I had my shaking hands spin the wheel,
tires wobbling left and right,
my foot stretching for the gas pedal.
Patches of missed grass standing tall,
taunting me.

“Keep to the line, feller,” he said.
“Keep to the line.”

Flannel-Clad Traveler

The trucker is always the first up,
the quiet early mornings
solemn vows between him and his sleeping wife.
He hitches up his leather boots
and buttoned-up flannels
before walking out the door.

Blacktop roads stretch longer and longer,
dark horizons beyond the headlights' reach.
The semi-truck like a lone wolf howling in the night.
His eyes drowsy from these hauls,
gas station burgers his lukewarm meal,
country radio music twanging at his heart.
He imagines his wife in the passenger seat, who says,
"It'll be all right."

His mind wanders to a forested paradise
surrounding a beige-sided house
complete with a trimmed lawn
and his blonde-haired boy and a dog
running along a creek.

They had only a cottage and a farm
with a battered barn. They lost
pigs and chickens in the flood.

Though the days drag on, he moves along,
the dream hovers above him
like a family picture clipped over the dashboard.
The blacktop roads may stretch longer and longer,
and he isn't getting stronger
hauling yellowed corn to convert it to gold.

It may not be easy, the life of a flannel-clad traveler,
leaving behind family and home,
yet he asks, "What else am I to do?"
He thinks of his wife at his side,
despite all their fights and squabbles,
and the woes tying them down;
he keeps his vow: "I do it just for you."

Thinning Hairs

Hair thins from age or chemo,
and a string of cherished moments dissipates
before loved ones' eyes like a strand
of web nestled in an attic.
No greying hairs left
on Grandma's red pantsuit, nor
on Grandpa's Wheelco caps or flannels,
as all hang abandoned on metal racks
ready for a summer sale.
What is left is a dog collar
of their Pug that's passed,
his small light locks stuck to the insides
of the clasp. Those hairs smoothed
from the reassuring caresses
of frail hands.

Lonely Girl

At the summer carnival, people found love
except for a lonely girl at home. Today,
I look up at her window and she glides
out of sight, a poet who leaves
her lines of verse that tell how I broke her heart
graffitied on walls. Always,

I could see her
out of the corner of my eye, blurry.
She stood in the wings, shadowed
by curtains at each one of my band's shows.
Her arms stayed crossed, guarding
a heart that she didn't want broken
despite the faint wave I gave to her.
Yet the sneers and jeers by school kids
surrounded her, and I
kept my distance. Her cries
I heard in the dark, beyond
the carnival's lights and rides. Her wails

echo in her cracked-wall home. The cold
graffitied message burns in my eyes:
"How will you—
after the years and people come and go—
handle being alone?"

Celluloid Silhouettes

8mm snapshots of siblings reunited,
illuminated by a shuttering projector
that makes shadows flicker and fade
to flesh and bone onscreen. Faces in focus,
hands in foreground that wave
to a one-man audience. Stills

of Fourth of July fireworks, street dances,
baseball games and carnival rides, and drive-ins
on a chill August night. Of a sister with her
hand on her little brother's shoulder, asking him
to make a wish for his tenth birthday. With one blow,
the candlelight on the cake disappears in a puff
of vapor that traces vague forms and floats
across the screen. Smoky

celluloid silhouettes that combust in a drought,
flame swallows each frame; sunrays imprint
the pupil with shapes of silver screen portraitures
whose mock lives melt to ashes. Figures
of embraces blink in the audience's line of sight
before rolling back, lost in the blind spot
of the eye.

Golden Leaves

A five year old girl skips and kicks
the crisp leaves before her feet,
watching the swirling orange and gold

fly in the sky like her uncle did to leaf piles
when he was a boy. He made his grandparents' farm
a fantasy of swashbuckling yarns,

as he swung from a rope atop the hay loft, brandished
a stick for a sword, ramped off planks with his bike as his horse,
and ran into the forest beyond where a witch lurked.

The leaves in mid-air flipped and turned like gilded pages
from a storybook collection he handed down to his niece,
a leather-bound record of childhood dreams.

Old stories write new journeys for a young girl:

she becomes a princess, pets as her subjects;
an explorer charting new lakes while fishing with her dad;
a good witch casting spells to make the cornfields grow.

On nights, when alone and scared of dark storm clouds
pelting hail down on her bedroom window, she hides under covers
with flashlight in hand, eyes on pictorial protectors

like the knight that saves the girl from a gloomy tower
or the huntsman that guides her out of haunted woods.
Let them lead her the right way, the uncle thinks as he wanders solo

along a path of autumn trees, head low, on a road where the ditches shine
a crimson tint below the orange canopy
that reminds him of his grandparents' farm.

A slight smile wrinkles the corners of his mouth before he disappears
within windswept foliage's highlighted corners. His memory
is another figment in a stack of golden leaves.

Pint-Sized Peddlers

Three little girls walked the streets alone
in the evening hours,
selling their arts and crafts to the neighbors.

The middle child pushed the youngest in a stroller;
the oldest dragged behind her a rusty wagon.
From door to door, adults came out, staring down

at the bruised blonde girls in their dresses
fraying at the hems. The girls' bare arms shook
from walking in the rain.

They said their crafts only cost a dollar.
For each purchase, adults got a coaster shaped
in a lopsided square of cardboard

coated in a thin layer of yellow paint.
Border decorations were three plastic stars
next to rattling googly eyes.

In black ink, the shaky scrawl
of a first grader with the product label:
"Shots Holder."

The girls made their money, telling people
they would save their earnings
when they got home. But they would not go home

when they feared their parents' bloodshot eyes,
the swinging fists, and loud cursing.
Out of the neighbors' view, the drenched girls took cover

under the bridge, hugging each other
before falling asleep near the river's rising current.
Their spirits still go around the blocks of houses,

pint-sized peddlers selling arts-and-crafts shots holders.
They wail that the only home left
is in the water under that same bridge.

Witch on the Street Corner

She stood with a blank stare
through ratty bangs
at small children playing ball
        in the street.
A lanky apparition in a white nightgown
        shaded under a crooked tree.

THWAP.
A boy kicked the ball,
arching it in the air, hitting
the lurking shadow's arm.
"AAAAARGRHHH!" she shrieked,
running after children,
        bony hands
outstretched in evening light.
        Pale and long-nailed feet
clicked on concrete.
        Children screamed
and sprinted for home.

Hiding under covers or kitchen sinks,
        children wept
of the witch outside.
Parents peered out windows,
with rows of streetlights spotting
the road.
        No boogeyman
watching children.
        A faceless hag
masked in matted hair
peeked into bedrooms,
paced around backyards,
sat on fences under moonlight,
        chanting.

My mom recalled her folks saying
it was a disturbed person
who ran from home
and was never found.
Years later, Mom still shuddered,
always looking over her shoulder.
Convinced an ageless witch
was hell-bent on finding her.

The figure in the stained gown looks out
now from my attic windows.
Under matted hair, milk-white eyes cast down,
        beckoning me home
with a twitching yellowed nail.

Her vortex warped my home,
        with fear and hatred as king.
The door opens from a rusty-hinged creak,
        the remaining spirits wailing
for my return.

The Majority No More

The town set itself on fire
from the fights and hate crimes.
Locals tried to hide
under carnival lights and rides,
glued grins matching hollow eyes.
Schools justified suicides
and barred people for not fitting in.
A kindergartner was called the N word
from kids on the playground,
and adults looked away.
Church groups posted propaganda
about the “termites” of the Middle East.
Rioters like my friends
chucked rocks at my house,
shouting “Liberal!” and “Nigger lover!”
in front of me.
Families like my own
divided over a pig and a jackass,
building walls in their own homes.
The witch cackled in delight, casting evils
in our heads ‘til we made each other
look like monsters. I could stand
the horrors of my town no more.
I could stand the majority
against the minority no more.
I was part of the majority no more,
leaving behind the friends now enemies
and the family members now strangers.
At each mile between myself and home,
I missed the good times
but realized they were lies all along.

The Passing Away of a Community from a Pastor's Point of View

Neighbors died everyday, but the people I buried
I knew from my sermons, the grocery store,
school functions, and summer festivals.

I buried an elderly widow
whose children never visited,
even at the side of their mother's coffin.

Next was the caring brother
of a struggling young man,
his suicide unexpected.

The person after him
was the music teacher's son,
the same age as my own.

Who will bury me
when I'm the last one around?
Nightmares of my wife and son's caskets

haunt me every night. During the day,
I listened to others' sorrows and worries.
Our collective fear

perspiring out of shaking palms.
The times for us all are at an end,
when we leave children out in the rain,

family disowns family because of differences,
and souls kill themselves
in their deserted homes. Misfortunes plague us,

and I have no answer. My sadness lingers
at the altar, the blue fluorescent cross
my only solace.

A Beer Among Brothers—Thoughts from an Abandoned Spirit

I drink to you, brother.
You made me happy after trying days
when I worked at Culver's
and fell behind in school.

You were my company
when our parents walked out on us,
and we had to take care of ourselves
in a house of peeling siding.

You comforted me
when I couldn't make much money
and Tricia's death was always on my mind.
We shared a beer or two
or more, until we laughed.

Now I only see a vacant spot
at your end of the couch, a half-empty beer can
left on the table. In the garage, I found you
in a bloody heap on the floor. No goodbyes
or sorries, just that beer can with its metal
crunched from your tight grip.

I hope you can hear me,
so you know I ain't mad.
I drink to you, brother,
finishing one last beer before I go.

A Boyfriend's Chance to Say Goodbye to Tricia who has Crossed Over

Halloween night—the first one we had apart.
All by myself, the living room lights off,
the TV on. My hand clutched
to the engagement ring, eyes shifted
to your picture on the mantel.
"Oh, Tricia, please
give me a chance to say goodbye."

The zombies and ghosts called at the doorstep,
gone once they received their prize.
I stood in a dark pantry, basked
in the orange grin of the jack-o-lantern.
I just wished you could walk towards home
like the rest of the dead tonight.

Eyes heavy as shadows grew under the harvest moon,
I heard a *tap-tap* at my door. My hand shook,
placing it on the knob. I opened it
as the clock struck midnight.
Only emptiness outside.

Printed Past

An obituary is an epitaph
by the news editors. The printing press
seals a soul
in musty ink and paper.

Scan the section for “Ted Joyce,”
a one-paragraph remembrance
wedged in the bottom corner.

He made his living going door to door
in a rumbling pickup truck,
mumbling under breath
as he put, in each mailbox,
the local paper.

He grunted a greeting whenever I saw him,
his eyes down,
arm shaking, handing me the paper.
A slouched frame hiding
in the grime.

One year, my family set a Christmas card
in our mailbox for Ted.
He made the rounds through the blizzard,
down his route of door-to-door silence,
to find our gift at the end.
His pickup idled in our driveway.
Beyond headlights, his silhouetted hand
wiped across shadowed eyes.

Until his death, Ted made sure we got the paper first.
The pickup would sit for a while,
only to pull back
to a road of closed doors.

Come Home with Me for Christmas—A Mom's Song to Her Son

Come home with me for Christmas,
Come home with me where lighted evergreens line the streets,
and a Frosty stands on every lawn.
Come home with me where family greets you with love,
and on the radio Bing Crosby sings yuletide songs.
Come home with me for Christmas.

It's been a trying year, you know so well.
Rise up to the music of those silver bells.
Son, know that when you're overseas and we're apart,
you're always in my heart.

Still remember your visit to the school music room
a week before Christmas Eve.
I wrapped my arms around your neck, tears on your uniform,
asking you never to leave.
You were home for the holidays, and you didn't have to run,
for you had a fireplace near you as soft as a winter sun.

On this Christmas, standing near your stone,
I caress that cold top. You are not alone,
but the silence in the cemetery is still
like the space in our home you used to fill.

Your brother wonders where you are.
I don't tell, but I keep the image of your wrecked car.
This song is yours from me at the piano keys,
wishing for you to please

come home with me for Christmas.

Letter to a Babysitter and Friend

Dee,
Your family still waits for you on Christmas Eve,
but never did you leave. You're with them
in your silver and gold décor, the lit Christmas tree
where they open presents, and the sugar cookies
your granddaughters make.

Always, you're there, while I left
family and home. I drove through different towns,
down streets leading into different seasons, lost
at the end of a winter road. Sleeping houses' dark eyes
gazed down at me with looks as icy
as the asphalt. I spent so long pushing forward,
never taking the time to feel a heart stretching
for those gilded lights strung along the glass.

In those frosted panes, I thought I saw myself
at age three, crying
for my mom. You held me
by the hand and led me
into a toasty kitchen, baked cinnamon rolls
on the counter. Our figures framed
in the soft glow of lighted garland wreathed
along the window. Tears disappeared, and I was a kid
that had you always there to welcome me
as though I were your own.

Battles in a Bottle

Marc, you had your first drink at fourteen,
shoulders slumped and feet shuffled. You bumped
into dank alley walls and tumbled into trashcans
at the back of Ship's Inn. Glassy eyes stared up
at a floodlight, you unaware
I was at your side.

You gave up school and home, teachers thought
you a lost cause. Your parents watched you
walk out as you tried making it on your own.
Your cocky smirk only masked
the pressurized sorrows in your head. Schoolwork
went unchecked, and you cashed-in your checks
working at the auto shop. But

inside your drafty apartment, I watched you vent
and wallow in a hazy rage. Each brown bottle
drowning your stained red eyes in pools
of fatigue and regret. You slurred
about the good times of the past:

a snapshot of us at the Carnival of '07,
or when we cruised down graveled paths
on your four-wheeler and left the town behind
in a cloud of dust.

On a country road, with the sun setting in diagonal lines,
under a violet overcast shading the pastures,
I can still see kicked-up rocks over
the horizon. A four-wheeler roars by.
You're gripping the handlebars, Marc, yipping
one last "Yee haw!" before fading
into the wind of dirt and exhaust once more.

Tangled Lives

The ghosts swing above brick buildings and peeling houses
when the town's lights go out at night. They're shadowy pendulums

with eyes casted toward Orion, the warrior killed
by a love and now a guard in the stars. He watches the spectral web

of lonely souls sweeping through the air on thin strands, they
meeting his gaze for a while before gravity pushes them

back down to the streets. Numb knuckles
hold the lines tight, to ascend again or plummet

to the pavement if the threads should snap. They spin
and swoop like arachnids on this webbed clock,

always kicking feet up. The night air whips their cheeks. They never
escape the ones who destroyed them. They're entangled

in each other's starry-silk ropes while circling up and around
the water tower. At the top and at rest,

after decorating with their spring garland, they scan the streets,
alleys, and dewy grass. Their confused eyes squint, asking why

they let the small world bother them. On top, they feel superpowers
that last for the night, before joining me back on the ground.

I look up at them, wondering what it must be like,
for just one night, being Orion observing from above.

Ditched Soldiers

The grandpa I didn't know
walks me along ditches of the dead
on a graveled road, where blood still runs.

Gutted soldiers
crawl and cry out
from sage brush graves.

"They want to go home," Grandpa says,
bowing his head at each ditch,
a frail man whose sunken cheeks
tighten at the sight.

"Thing is, I can't let them go,"
he mutters through choked-back tears.
"They're a part of me, and I'm a part of them."

He was their friend, brother,
and gravedigger at their end,
pushed by captors to cart off
rotted corpses.

Limbs dropped from joints,
Grandpa picking them up piece by piece,
tossing remains into muddy ditches.

"I see them with each road I take,"
Grandpa whispers, stopping in the middle of the path.
The corpses crawl out of sage,
raising sad eyes
that plead for proper burial spots.

Grandpa's hunched frame weighs
with sorrow. He points toward home
before drifting away, saying,
"Ya gotta keep your past, boy. That there town?
It ain't gonna leave. Ignorin' it
just makes things worse."

Brother Back Home

Curled up on the doormat or by my bedroom door
with a stuffed hedgehog toy at his side,
my little brother longs for my return.

At nights, he dreams of the summer landscape
down by the creek, he racing after me
as fast as small legs could carry him.

His high yips of life-loving joy echo outside,
happy to have a place called home
with a family he thought he'd never have.

Years passed and I drifted further away.
Gone were days he and I played in the leaves and snow.
Now I'm home, and like everything else,

my brother is a memory.
That hedgehog toy lies by my bedroom door,
stubby arms open to nothing.

I Swear, Dad

"I swear, Dad,
there's been so much
I've wanted to tell you.
Years of silence kept
us apart. My smart mouth antagonized
until you slammed the door
in my face. Now I sit

in your truck, thinking back
to a past where you and I got up
in the early morning and started the Kenworth
for the day's haul. Your firm hand
patted my shoulder for a good day's work.

I swear, Dad,
Mom is no longer a weeping go-between
in our wordless feud.
It was me I hated
all these years. Always I found trouble,
and you always dragged me out. I could never

be the man you are. For so long,
I kept my distance and slipped
down a rope greased with my own sins,
fought and slandered wearing a cocksure mask.

I swear, Dad,
I know 'sorry' won't cut it.
Don't know if you can hear me
from the CB static on the other end.
You don't have to answer,
I'll understand."

No response, just static crackling
in my ear. I say goodbye.
The CB radio cuts out,
and I step out and shut the door.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Speeding the Conquest past Main Street
as the lights and rides shut down
and gears grind to a halt,
I think about the niece I left with her folks.
She was a little girl looking up at me,
teary eyes wondering why I had to go.
Someday she'll know that adults can't stay
in the same old place of faded dreams
and blackened hearts, of lonely ghosts'
nightly moans. Brothers and sisters fall apart,
silent bitterness toward each other,
our skin marked with history's cuts.

Where do we go from here?

I cannot say because I fear it's too late,
when pride divided us
and roads between us grew longer,
memories vanishing like the restless spirits
of this town.

Driving off to the horizon of rolling hills,
I gaze back in the rearview mirror
as my family waves to me.

Eyes on the road and thoughts on my life,
I decide I will return again someday.

Chapter Three: Applying Concepts of Ethnographic Verse in a Narrative in Verse

Upon completion of this poetry collection, I have attempted to combine elements of the real and surreal in a loose conceptual narrative that creates tension between the past and the present. I created a speaker in this narrative in verse that tries to make sense of past occurrences within a small community, understanding how those events affected him, and what he intends to do with his life after examining the vivid, yet supernatural sightings so prevalent in the literal ghost town. Writing these poems has given me a greater appreciation for poetry and what it can do to capture snapshots of small town living. Speaking mainly as a fiction/creative nonfiction writer, I found the writing style both as a luxury and an extreme challenge due to the concision required in lines of verse. The snapshots I describe in my poetry needed striking imagery and precise language that hit the emotional beats I wanted for each piece, no further commentary or reflection required. More than any writing project I have worked on, this poetry collection definitely proved the most challenging and extensively revised work yet. Nevertheless, I was ambitious to pursue this endeavor.

I got the idea for this poetry collection two years ago, and it grew from just one poem. The seed of this collection was the poem "Ghost Café." This poem was one of my earliest experiments with the poetic style. Unlike the other poems I wrote at the same I wrote "Ghost Café," the poem about the café stuck with me the most because it was reminiscent of a similar café in my hometown. A family-owned business that had lasted for generations, as mentioned in the poem, the place finally closed a few months before I drafted "Ghost Café." Anytime I walked down one of

the sidewalks on Main Street after the café closed, I would peer through the windows and scan the barren and dusty interior that was once a social spot for elderly people drinking their late-afternoon coffee, high school seniors eating burgers for lunch, and families having reunions with close and distant relatives. I always felt a sense of loss about the place, and that feeling was successfully evident in the final draft of the poem. Because of my interest in writing this nostalgic (and somehow) melancholic piece, I developed other ideas for poems that would follow a similar theme to the one in "Ghost Café."

In the summer of that year when I wrote "Ghost Café," the second poem I composed was "Carnival of '07." I consider "Carnival of '07" and "Ghost Café" companion pieces because, during that summer carnival with the impressive rides, lights, and performances, there was a party at the café, where people danced to old fifties tunes from a jukebox machine while black-and-white photos from that same decade hung on the walls. At age fourteen, I never saw anything so uplifting as seeing various community members of different ages enjoying themselves, both at the carnival and in the café. Describing the carnival and the activity offered a much wider scope for me to work with, and it gave me the chance to introduce significant characters from my personal life that would eventually have their own poems. Due to this wider scope from the scene in "Carnival of '07," I realized the narrative potential of a poetry collection based on the people and events in my hometown. As companion pieces, "Carnival of '07" is a frame to the confined, more intimate setting of "Ghost Café." With that framework in mind, I then saw new material to write,

based on the characters I mentioned at the carnival. Such character-driven pieces helped shape the direction I wanted to take with this narrative.

Looking at individuals and their lives and struggles created a new layer to the narrative of this poetry collection. While poems like "Carnival of '07" and "Ghost Café" have a mostly nostalgic and happy perspective of the town, character poems like "Pint-Sized Peddlers," "A Beer Among Brothers—Thoughts from an Abandoned Spirit," and "Come Home with Me for Christmas—A Mom's Song to Her Son" reveal the sadness of the community members as well as the tragedies that befell some of the people who were at the carnival so many years ago. "A Boyfriend's Chance to Say Goodbye to Tricia who has Crossed Over" was the first character poem to deal with these community members' sorrows. I mention the characters of Tricia and her boyfriend at the carnival and how they are happy together, but then this dreamlike scene vanishes and in place is the harsh reality of her death. This poem tries to represent the boyfriend's thoughts as he struggles coping with the loss of Tricia. Finding the tension with this poem then steered me in the direction of the narrative's conflict between the past and the present. With this conflict of time in mind, I began outlining a story that would weave these character-driven pieces with the broader, more nostalgic poems that I wrote earlier. The story, as I soon discovered, would take on a much more personal meaning for me, besides the fact that these poems have to do with my hometown.

The story I hoped to make—along with the overall theme—was one that focused on an individual returning to his hometown, reflecting on the people and events that came and went, and coming to terms with moments of the past that

always haunted this individual. Feelings of happiness, bitterness, and sadness would become evident over the course of this narrative, with the speaker convincing himself that everything was good in his hometown and then, after each poem, he begins seeing the bad memories creep up around him. His intent to come back to this town becomes clear, even though it's deserted, and the struggle stems from the protagonist's decision whether or not to accept his past mistakes and move on. How he learns from his mistakes and faces his conflicts is through his eyewitness accounts of the residents' lamentations over loved ones as well as his reflections on people who impacted his life in a positive way. These occurrences give the speaker the courage to face memories he would have otherwise chose to let fade into obscurity over the passage of time.

Because of this theme of faded memories and people, the characters would become ghosts residing in this deserted town, which follows the symbolism in "Ghost Café." Based on the poems I drafted in the early stages of my writing process, I decided that these ghosts were not figments of the protagonist's imagination; instead, they would be literal ghosts. Those who were mentioned in an earlier poem, like Tricia, don't appear in subsequent poems because they did not have as many woes and sins as the other characters. I did not know what this specifically meant, but as I explored more of the issues of the town, I thought that the spirits remaining in the town were responsible for terrible actions that did not allow them to cross over. Meanwhile, other characters like the ones in "Lonely Girl" and "Pint-Sized Peddlers" did not cross over because they do not have closure to any of the hardships that plagued them when they were alive: the character in "Lonely Girl"

haunts her home because no one showed her much affection and still in vain seeks it out, while the little girls in "Pint-Sized Peddlers" go door to door in some way looking for a home away from their presumably awful one. Every ghost is damned to reside in the town, trying to make the most of their afterlives but never finding any hope from their predicament. They and the speaker or "the medium" communicating with the spirits, are parallels to one another because both sides are remorseful for or resentful towards the wrongs of the past. Observing these spirits' attitudes thus makes the medium understand how both resentment and remorse without redemption can damage an individual, and he then must learn to overcome those feelings in the end.

I had the basic framework of this poetry collection planned before I did any research, even though that research would soon help me find the connective tissue needed to string these poems into a coherent narrative. The research proved encouraging for me because there was a vast amount of material on place-based poetry and the supernatural. Place-based poetry focuses on a poet's representation of a community and the people, customs, and language that characterize a location. The supernatural blends itself with this depiction of a community. Classic poets like Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and Edgar Lee Masters display indicative applications of this ethnographic/supernatural approach in their respective works *Leaves of Grass*, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, and *Spoon River Anthology*. With *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman uses the titular grass as a symbol for rebirth that grows from the soil containing the dead, which then connects both the deceased and the living that walks on the grass. Frost's *A Boy's Will* details the journey of a young man seeking

his own independence in the wilderness, while at the same time analyzing abandoned places that the dead reside in. *North of Boston*, meanwhile, goes into specific detail about a farming community and the important values that the community members hold. Finally, Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* plays out like a series of confessions from a community of the dead residing in a graveyard and lamenting the sorrows they endured while alive.

Out of these works, Frost's *A Boy's Will* was the most helpful source for me because the loose conceptual narrative in that poetry collection worked with similar themes and motifs that I developed in the early drafts of my narrative. The titular character in *A Boy's Will* seeks solitude in the woods, far away from civilization. Throughout the four seasons, he begins to understand the importance of a community again, so he ends up willingly returning to his town after living a year with a lonely lifestyle. With my poetry collection, I switch this narrative concept around, where I feature a speaker with conflicted feelings as he already enters the community. The town is deserted yet occupied at the same time with these spirits, and they, unlike the dead in the *Boy's Will* poem "Ghost House," actually interact with him to some extent. I follow a seasonal progression as the narrative progresses, but I try not to call attention to it; it is a suitable motif to use as long as the situations and environments both work well with whatever mood I set up. Quite like the speaker in *A Boy's Will*, my speaker accepts the conditions around him and proceeds to move on to a different locale. However, my speaker deviates from the formula as he moves away from the community and drives off to some unknown place at the end of the narrative.

Gathering this research and finding sufficient parallels between my work and other works by poets like Whitman and Frost gave me the encouragement to move even further with this project. How I would weave different elements of place-based poetry based on the theory I used, along with the examples from Whitman, Frost, Masters, and more modern poets, I hope I created a poetry collection that effectively blends real and supernatural elements for the sake of a compelling conceptual narrative. I went into different directions as well, and from "Carnival of '07" to "Where Do We Go from Here?," I will explain why I made the decisions that appear in the finished text.

The Poems: Choice of Content and Metaphor

Unifying Imagery

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I intended for "Carnival of '07" to be the framework that brings characters and situations that will develop throughout the rest of the poetry collection. Having this framework is the equivalent of Whitman's universal image of the leaves of grass that somehow work to bind the living and the dead together. The leaves of grass is what makes the various people described in Whitman's work seem like they are a collective group. Whatever their differences, no matter what occupation or class they are a part of, the people represented in *Leaves of Grass* receive no apparent form of discrimination because of that universal image of the ground everyone walks on. The carnival in my first poem aims for that same level of unity, since it has this pleasant imagery of a summer day where people meet at this town event and everyone gets along. A

nostalgic tone is prevalent in most of this poem, which is deceptive because it then carries hints of melancholy at the end: the speaker recalls these events, only to snap out of his thoughts and to notice the barren and rundown condition of Main Street. The binding image of the carnival sets up a sense of community as well as the tension between the past and the present.

The second poem "Ghost Café" follows a similar formula, but on a smaller scale. Since the café mentioned in the poem was one of the most popular places in my hometown, it had some significant memories and characteristics that gave further character to the community and how these people interacted. The speaker in the poem looks through the glass door of the café and sees the emptiness that is now there, only imagining what it was like in that café years ago. This motif of memory is parallel to Frost's "The Census-Taker," which featured the titular speaker observing ghostly figures that once lived in a house. While the ghostly imagery has connections with an element of my narrative in verse that I will discuss later, the supernatural element attempts to characterize a unified community that no longer exists. Ida's Café is a great unifying image because, as described in the poem, people of all ages socialize with each other. "Ghost Café" may follow "Carnival of '07" in its sweeping descriptions of the community members; nevertheless, this poem does so as it frames people in a specific interior. "Carnival of '07" introduced various characters and potential themes for later poems through a panoramic scene of the town; "Ghost Café" further develops the townspeople, just through a small picture frame into the daily lives of those people.

Creating that sense of unity in these first two poems was essential because it could allow me to smoothly ease into the more troubling themes that appear in the rest of the narrative in verse. The fact that the town in this narrative is a literal ghost town adds to the titular character's isolation. While the medium may see the ghosts, he nevertheless is the only living being in the town and therefore feels like an outsider. This narrative conflict between person and place had some parallels with Frost's *A Boy's Will*, since both deal with a speaker living in an isolated area far away from civilization. For the speaker in *A Boy's Will*, he lives out in the wilderness; for the speaker in my narrative, he lives in this town that is away from the big cities and seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Both the wilderness and the town provide that sense of the Other for each speaker in his respective narrative. The Other represents the anxieties and desires of the speaker. For Frost's speaker in *A Boy's Will*, he longs for independence and answers that justify his own break from society. However, my speaker in my narrative seeks understanding for his past and tries to make sense of mistakes he made long ago. Providing the Other in a way reminiscent of Frost's woods in *A Boy's Will* only helps me build tension between my speaker and the people in this town.

Connections between the speaker and the people became more unified when I let the speaker acknowledge the supernatural forces in this town. In acknowledging them, the speaker can look from the points of view of these ghosts, so that he (and the readers) can have a better understanding of who these community members are in this narrative. Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* was an excellent model to follow as I figured out how exactly to implement this writing

technique in my own poetry. In *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters builds a community with the unified imagery of a cemetery. The cemetery is like a neighborhood for the dead: they are close to each other and share common ground in their mourning for their past lives or people they might never see again.

Having those types of connections between the dead and the living was necessary in the poems that appear later in the narrative. These poems could create greater empathy between the speaker and the community because the present (the character) recognizes the woes of the past (the people). Poems like "A Beer Among Brothers—Thoughts from an Abandoned Spirit," "Come Home with Me for Christmas—A Mom's Song to Her Son," and "The Passing Away of a Community from a Pastor's Point of View" give depth to these townspeople through the medium's ability to get inside their heads, in order to communicate those sorrows effectively to readers. Both the brother and the mother in these first two poems reflect on their longing for their loved ones, and it is the pastor who brings these characters together since he buried both the brother and the son of the respective speakers. The pastor says, "Next was the caring brother / of a struggling young man, / his suicide unexpected. / The person after him / was the music teacher's son, / the same age as my own" (ll. 7-12). With "The Passing Away of a Community from a Pastor's Point of View," the narrative brings the community's collective sadness together first. The townspeople look to the pastor for help, but he has no answers in the end when there is so much pain in the town. As the pastor notes at the end of the poem, the cross above him is "[his] only solace" (ll. 27). This pastor's role matches another religious figure's significance in *Spoon River Anthology*. The poem entitled

"Father Malloy" features a speaker discussing the pastor's past life, saying, "You were a part of and related to a great past, / And yet you were so close to many of us. / You believed in the joy of life" (ll. 13-15). Father Malloy, according to the speaker, handled the changing times. The pastor in my narrative does so, as well, but those changes are still difficult for him.

Using a community of ghosts may evoke empathy in this narrative because, in addition to getting inside the minds of those ghosts, the speaker also observes how different characters react to a similar loss. Such similarities appear in the poems "A Beer Among Brothers" and "A Boyfriend's Chance to Say Goodbye to Tricia who has Crossed Over." In the first poem, the brother mentions how his sibling was there for him when "Tricia's death was always on [his] mind. / Those were nights [they] shared a beer or two / or more, until [they] laughed" (ll. 11-13). In the second poem, the boyfriend is alone on Halloween night a few months after his girlfriend died. Unlike the character in the previous poem, the boyfriend has no one to comfort him, which spurs his more macabre thoughts. He states, "I just wished you could walk towards home / like the rest of the dead tonight" (ll. 12-13). With these poems, the narrative features characters reacting to a similar hardship, but it shows the different ways that these people handle their pain. As an observer of this community, my speaker can find an empathetic relationship with these ghosts through his own reflections of people from his past.

Seasonal Change and Tone

Taking something away from Frost's *A Boy's Will* once again, I thought that the seasonal changes would, while used numerous times before in poetry and literature, blend well with the changes my speaker experiences during his year-long stay in the ghost town. Each encounter he has with the supernatural would have a tone that somehow matched with the atmosphere. From summer in the beginning to spring in the end, the narrative would describe friendly meetings with the spirits and then the nightmarish conflicts later that year. As discussed earlier, "Carnival of '07" and "Ghost Café" were those deceptively happy, although sad, poems that welcomed both the character and the reader. The imagery in these poems was warm and vibrant, nothing intimidating save for the fact that they are illusions of a desolate town.

For this summer section, I thought it crucial to give readers an idea of who the speaker was in his past life with family and friends. Poems like "The Stage Lights of Our Lives" and "Serenity Creek" let the readers know that the speaker in this narrative had a rather good life: he was in a band with some of his friends, and when he was younger, he liked walking around the creek in his backyard. With "Serenity Creek," though, tension between the past and the present appears when the speaker stops reminiscing and sees the creek for what it truly is now: a murky and unkempt part of nature. This tension helps segue into the speaker's personal life, as he looks back on his grandpa as a role model in "Flannel-Clad Traveler" and "Falling Out of Line." These poems are the speaker's way of idolizing his grandpa as a hardworking, determined individual. At the end of "Falling Out of Line," the speaker notes how he

falls short of his grandpa's expectations as he cannot even handle a lawnmower: "I had my shaking hands spin the wheel, / tires wobbling left and right, / my foot stretching for the gas pedal / Patches of missed grass . . . [taunt] me" (ll. 19-23). The speaker wants to be like his grandpa, but he cannot keep on a straight path. These final lines would serve as foreshadowing of the character's dilemma in this narrative. He aimed to do well, but somehow, aspects of his life made him deviate from that path his grandpa set.

Identifying this dilemma was then a logical transition to the fall and winter sections of the narrative. As the weather cools, so do the speaker's memories of his hometown, and he finally sees the place for what it is in the present day. The tone of the poems that appear in these sections is reminiscent of Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, but it also borrows from the tone in Ron Rash's *Raising the Dead*. In his collection, Rash examines the destruction of a community. His poem "Death's Harbors," which appears near the end of the collection, describes the results of flooding in the town due to a dam project:

> [Y]ou wake
> where gravestones fin the lake floor,
> where dead rested before raised
> three decades ago. The holes
> their bodies filled have not filled,
> death's harbors still vacant. (ll. 10-15)

Rash reflects on the disrespectful deeds done to the dead, noting that the dead are still restless when there are only vacancies in the graves they laid in.

Unrest is evident with the spirits that appear in my poems “Pint-Sized Peddlers” and “Lonely Girl.” Near the end of the first poem, the girls have no rest: “Their spirits still go around the blocks of houses, / pint-sized peddlers selling arts-and-crafts shots holders. / They wail that the only home left / is in the water under that same bridge” (ll. 27-30). These girls are as restless as the dead people that Rash discusses in “Death’s Harbors” because a reader knows that the girls never had a proper burial. As girls that went door to door selling their arts and crafts to neighbors late at night, the last time the speaker notes they were last alive was under a roadway. They drowned in the river, which rose when the girls fell asleep under the bridge. This poem may reflect the negligence adults may have when children are left alone to fend for themselves, and that negligence is what makes the girls so restless as they seek attention from anyone still residing in the town. The second poem “Lonely Girl” follows a similar theme because the speaker feels responsible for mistreating her when the girl had a crush on him. He sees her at her bedroom window, and she avoids him by walking back into the shadows of her room. Her broken heart is what makes her a restless spirit.

Restlessness not only applies to the dead, but it also applies to the living. Poems like “A Boyfriend’s Chance to Say Goodbye to Tricia who has Crossed Over” and “Come Home with Me for Christmas—A Mom’s Song to Her Son” give readers a look at the restless spirits in the community. Nevertheless, restlessness may appear to readers in the form of the speaker of my poetic narrative. In “Golden Leaves,” the speaker reflects upon the niece he may never see again, the last present he gave to her was a storybook collection with gilded pages. While fantasies are contained in

those golden pages, so too are the ghosts of his memories of her in the swirls of fall leaves that blow in the wind. Despite his feelings, he manifests these emotions into a separate spirit that walks around in the fall leaves. “Letter to a Babysitter and Friend” further establishes the restlessness of the speaker, with this poem serving as the speaker’s reflection of the impact his former babysitter had on his life: “I left / family and home. I drove through different towns, / down streets leading into different seasons, / lost at the end of a winter road” (ll. 7-10). He continues, “I spent so long pushing forward, / never taking the time to feel a heart stretching / for those gilded lights strung along the glass” (ll. 12-14). The speaker in my narrative realizes that home is better for him after all of his journeys. The winter section of the narrative then is a time for reflection for both the speaker and the ghosts of the town.

At last, the spring section is the point of rebirth (or change) for the speaker of my narrative as he faces his final conflicts with the most alarming spirits. Such conflicts have some relation to one of the last poems in Frost’s *A Boy’s Will*. In “The Demiurge’s Laugh,” the speaker chases after a demon in the woods that laughs at him. The speaker, in the final stanza of the poem, notes,

> I shall not forget how his laugh rang out.
>
> I felt as a fool to have been so caught,
>
> And checked my steps to make pretense
>
> It was something among the leaves I sought
>
> (Though doubtful whether he stayed to see).
>
> Thereafter I sat me against a tree. (ll. 13-18)

The speaker is on a futile chase, as the demon could possibly represent the desires the speaker had as he embarked out into the wilderness at the start of Frost's poetic narrative. With this last stanza, a reader may infer that the speaker has nowhere to go, only the demon's mocking laughter in his ear. This conflict with a demon, along with the withering of the vegetation in "October," might lead to the speaker's decision to return to civilization in the finale "Reluctance." Regardless, the speaker is at odds with a force beyond his control.

My speaker faces such conflict and character change during his struggles with his personal demons. "Witch on the Street Corner" presents a character vaguely similar to the demon in Frost's "The Demiurge's Laugh." In this poem, the speaker recalls a story his mom used to tell him about a disturbed individual that followed her when she was a kid. The mom was scared of this person, thinking her a witch. At the end of the poem, the character sees this same person standing at the attic window. Like the demon in Frost's poem, this witch mocks the character, but takes the mockery further by living in the speaker's old home. The main character states,

> Her vortex warped my home,
>
> with fear and hatred as king.
>
> The door opens from a rusty-hinged creak,
>
> the remaining spirits wailing
>
> for my return. (ll. 46-50)

Isolation prevails over the speaker because the macabre figure of the witch resides in his family home, which only strengthens the misery within that house. The

speaker then has no choice but to confront the family he avoided and the reasons he had for doing so. This moment then marks a transition in the speaker's journey as he attempts to make meaning from his past and what he can do for his future.

In order to start some sort of resolution, the speaker must acknowledge his own shortcomings and the harsh reality of his past. A politically driven poem like "The Majority No More" is a means to show the possible destruction that people make for themselves. Throughout this poem, the speaker reflects on how differences can destroy not just a town but also a family. To the extent of the destruction of a town, this poem followed in the same vein of Rash's first poem in *Raising the Dead*, "Last Service." Rash describes the cranes and bulldozers that "yanked free marble and creek stones / like loose teeth, and then shovels / [that] unearthed coffins" (ll. 2-4). Of the townspeople, Rash states,

> [T]hey still congregated there,
> wading then crossing in boats
> those last Sunday nights, their farms
> already lost in the lake,
> nothing but that brief island
> left of their world . . . (ll. 11-16)

The "island" is the remnant of the community's land before the flooding that the dam project brought on. Townspeople in "The Majority No More" create their own islands based on their differences, which adds to their sorrows in the afterlife, as most are damned to stay in the community. The speaker himself feels lost now because he left so many people he knew. When he comes back to his hometown, he

realizes that he has nothing left. The rest of the narrative then charts the speaker's path to reconciliation.

Unlike some of these poetry collections that deal with the themes of death, I wanted my narrative to end on a slightly hopeful note. At the end of the narrative, this final poem would not be overly optimistic like a previous poem I initially planned. The new poem "Where Do We Go from Here?" would give that slight gleam of hope for the speaker while not cheapening the serious issues brought up in the earlier poems. In this poem, the speaker finally encounters the spirits of his niece and sister, the only family he has left in the town. I wanted my speaker to have the same reluctance of growth Frost's speaker has at the end of *A Boy's Will*. In "Reluctance," Frost's speaker states,

> Ah, when to the heart of man
>
> Was it ever less than a treason
>
> To go with the drift of things,
>
> To yield with a grace to reason,
>
> And bow and accept the end
>
> Of a love or a season? (ll. 19-24)

The speaker learns to shed his past woes of society and to integrate well in a community once more. For the speaker in my poetic narrative, he allows himself to move on and accept his past. When he says, "I decide I will return again someday" (ll. 23), the speaker is willing to return to society outside of the ghost town, though he will return to visit his remaining family that he left behind.

This narrative was difficult and slightly complex. When I wrote these poems as separate pieces, I did not realize how they might connect to one another, or if they would make sense as a cohesive whole. After looking at my examples and how various poets handle similar themes, I came away with a better understanding of how to develop my poetic narrative.

Realism Through Customs and Local Language

Although this collection of poetry is mainly a fictional narrative based in part on my hometown, the subject matter needed grounded descriptions of the culture within this community, so that the ethnographic part of my poetry worked well next to the supernatural aspects. The ethnographic theory, as well as the historical development behind it, that I established in Chapter One prepared me well for my descriptions of small town life.

Because I am representing a rural community, I wrote poems based around some of the jobs people had. Coincidentally, these job descriptions would fit thematically with the speaker's sense of veering away from his family's expectations for him. "Flannel-Clad Traveler" was the first of these poems that detailed the life of a trucker and the loneliness felt on the road during long hauls. Though the speaker in this poem is lonely and frustrated, he has a sense of responsibility for his family. Jim Reese, in his poetry collection *These Trespasses*, has a similar poem with "These Highways." This poem is a tribute to a friend of Reese's, who was a truck driver. Here, the speaker says, "Here's to twenty-cent miles, / payphones and voice. / Here's to triple bacon cheeseburgers / and ice-packed windshields—inevitable fear"

(ll. 14-17). This poem elaborates on the truck driver's routine, and the isolation is quite clear in the realistic details in each stanza. Realism in "Flannel-Clad Traveler" comes from the details of the headlights on the dark roads during the early morning, the gas station burgers he eats, and the country music that fills the silence in the truck. Attention to these details to make a connection with the subject stems from my reading of Frost's poem "Mowing." In this poem, as discussed in Chapter One, Frost's speaker describes the rhythm of mowing the grass and the liberation mowing gives to that speaker. The trucker in "Flannel-Clad Traveler" does not necessarily feel liberated, but he has a duty to his family and has a dream of a good life, much like Frost's speaker in "Mowing."

I aimed to represent my hometown through realistic descriptions of the customs and work environment. Not only would these descriptions hopefully make some connections between the readers and the characters in this narrative, but they would also establish my own authority on this subject. In his analysis of Frost's work, Sean Heuston sees the importance such authority has on readers' perceptions of a poet: "[Clearly,] Frost manufactur[ed] ethnographic authority, fabricating something like rural New England authenticity in order to lend more weight . . . to his work. Frost manufactured his special brand of ethnographic authority so successfully that . . . he became . . . [the voice] of the culture region" (59). After reflecting upon Frost's work and Heuston's analysis, I wanted my speaker, as the medium coming into this town, to be the voice of the ghostly community. Not only would he record the thoughts and emotions of the ghosts, but he would also describe the work and customs they did. "Flannel-Clad Traveler" was one poem that

sought to fulfill this goal within my poetic narrative; in addition to that, "Keep to the Line" built upon this authoritative voice. "Falling Out of Line" parallels Frost's "Mowing" through the work discussed in each poem. However, "Falling Out of Line" also gives further details to the character of the speaker's grandfather. Detailing the focus and sweat that goes into the work is reminiscent of "Mowing," and it highlights the persevering aspects of the grandfather in the poem.

Language was also important for me to capture when incorporating dialogue into my poems, even though it was such a minor part in my work. Dialogue also gives one's ethnographic verse more authority when it is everyday speech that seems common to an area. Reese uses a certain speech with his characters in a poem like "Understanding Animals—A Primer." When discussing a trip to the country, a character may have a certain dialect with phrases like "Lookee there at them / pretty cows" (ll. 10-11) or "Them ain't pretty cows—them / there is heifers" (ll. 13-14). This dialect brings to mind the phrases I often heard in my own rural community growing up. In "Keep to the Line," the dialect for the grandfather was reminiscent of my own grandfather's speech. Use of the words "feller" and "ain't," as well as double negatives, in this poem and others creates a realistic dialect with the spirits in this rural community. Remembering these words and phrases from my past and integrating them into my poetry helped me with more natural characterizations of my subject throughout this narrative.

In addition to occupations and dialect, events like carnivals and garage sales lend more authority to my narrative's roots in ethnographic verse because they can offer images of small town Americana. Regarding garage sales, a poet can find

meaning in these homemade displays because the objects can represent a subject's past life. Ted Kooser, in *Delights & Shadows* (2004), finds this in "Garage Sale." In this poem, the speaker addresses a widow selling her husband's belongings. Through imagery, the speaker notes the absence of that husband based on the state of those belongings: "[T]he head of his hammer is loose from pounding, / and he has twisted his screwdriver out / of its handle . . . and all with the fingers / he touches you with" (ll. 7-12). The husband's presence seems to stay within these items because of his touch. I aimed to follow Kooser's example with my poem "Thinning Hairs," which focused on my speaker's insight on his grandparents' belongings and how hairs from their dog somehow preserve their memories. Having these thoughts of the afterlife in a relatable setting like a garage sale helps ground the supernatural elements to some degree of realism, and the small town setting would help build upon some of the more spiritual ideas that appear in this narrative in verse.

Meditations of the Supernatural

Although finding empathy through unifying imagery and shared dialect was essential in creating my narrative, the supernatural element needed to build upon this empathetic message of sorrow and forgiveness with a more transcendental, spiritual outlook on life. I was not sure how I would do this with one or more poems. Nevertheless, I found my answer in Whitman's "The Sleepers" in *Leaves of Grass*. With this poem, the speaker meditates on the different states of sleep for numerous people and how everyone seems to transcend the troubles in their everyday lives: "I swear they are all beautiful, / Every one that sleeps is beautiful . . . . every thing in

the dim / night is beautiful, / The wildest and bloodiest is over and all is peace" (117). The speaker in Whitman's poem seems to take on a transcendental tone in his poem, as he views all people asleep at the moment. Watching them, he cannot help but notice the blissful state of sleep despite the troubles surrounding people. My poem "Tangled Lives" sought to go this same transcendental route. In this poem, the speaker walks through the streets of the town at night. As he looks up, he watches the ghosts swing on strands of translucent web, only for some to rise up to the top of the water tower. Unlike the sleepers in Whitman's poem, the spirits in "Tangled Lives" are restless and want to escape their tormented pasts in the town. They do so through the webbing coming from their hands, but gravity always brings them back down. When they stand atop the water tower, they feel free, gazing up at the stars and knowing that their liberation will last until daylight. The speaker notes, "I look up at them and wave, wondering what it must be like, / for just one night, being Orion observing from above" (ll. 19-20). With these lines, the speaker attempts making a connection with these spirits, relating to their sense of powerlessness. Like the ghosts, the speaker wishes he could have that same freedom to fly in the sky. Yet he is just another lost individual that Orion watches over.

Similar to the tone in "The Sleepers," "Tangled Lives" is a quiet poem, as it slows the narrative down and gives the readers a chance to see the speaker develop a deeper connection with the ghosts in this town. When it came to the placement of the poem in this narrative, I found that this poem would work great as a precursor to the last few poems when the speaker confronts his own family. Once I composed this poem, I finally realized the entirety of this narrative's thematic arc.

Style and Scene in Poetry

My greatest struggle with this creative thesis was the style of my poems. I did not have much experience with poetry prior to writing this narrative, and so I went through numerous revisions to find the right structure for each piece. Free verse was the most suitable style for my poetry because it did not seem as restrained as rhyme. However, I found out otherwise once I started because I had to condense so much of my work. Having more experience with prose, my lines were rather long; therefore, restraint and concision were necessary.

To figure out my line composition, I focused on line endings and the purposes of the lengths of lines. According to Michelle Boisseau, a poem must have "each line [that has] its own integrity. . . . A poem that deploys compound-complex sentences over many long lines must earn the grandeur these lines suggest. A line suddenly shorter than its neighbors must decisively earn the created emphasis through the line's context within the poem" (Finch and Varnes 73). A shorter line can sometimes express the main idea of a poem better than a longer line. This works through enjambment, or according to Boisseau, "[the] continuing the sentence past the line ending—the poet can deepen a poem's textural undercurrents" (Finch and Varnes 74). On this importance of the line ending, James Longenbach, in his book *The Art of the Poetic Line*, notes, "[N]o particular line is valuable except inasmuch as it performs a dramatic function in relationship to other lines in a particular poem: one kind of line ending becomes powerful because of its relationship to other kinds of line endings" (68). Enjambment worked well for my poem "Ghost Café," where the line endings help contrast between the past and the present. In stanza five, the lines

end with words like “stripped,” “remain etched,” and “white canvas.” While the present condition of the café is barren, that does not mean the past “remain[s] etched” on the blank walls. The final stanza makes effective use of line endings, adding to the sense of decay in the place. Words and phrases like “buried,” “layers of dust,” and “an epitaph that reads” all contribute to this theme of death and remembrance for a certain place.

Along with enjambment, indentation strategies can contribute to a speaker’s movement of thought. In one example, Boisseau states that a poet could use right- and left-hand margins “to mimic the pendulum of thought” (75). In “Ghost Café,” I implement indentations to represent the trailing off, or fading, of past memories within a place. I do this in the second stanza when describing the café’s various losses:

> Gone are the waltzing couples, spinning near the front windows,
>
> the old jukebox music blasting through the cracks of the front door.
>
> Gone is the boisterous laughter and off-key singing. (ll. 6-8)

Like the ghosts in the café, the speaker’s thoughts about the café drift off. Stylistically, the line composition works effectively with the dramatic tension established in the poem.

Breaking poems into couplets or tercets helped add to the tension within certain pieces. “Tangled Lives” has couplets because it adds to the swinging back and forth of the ghosts in this poem. Timothy Steele states, “[C]ouplets move swiftly back and forth between action and meditation, dialogue and narrative” (Finch and Varnes 107). Steele discusses Geoffrey Chaucer here, but his insights about couplets

are still significant to my own application of them. Since "Tangled Lives" is a meditative poem, it needed couplets to best represent that literal and metaphorical swinging back and forth of conflicting thoughts that the speaker notes within the ghosts. Meanwhile, tercets help contain individual thoughts or scenes in a poem. Felix Stefanile states that this structure, when following a rhyme patter, "closes [a] thought unit" (Finch and Varnes 116). While my poem "Brother Back Home" does not follow a rhyme scheme, it nevertheless uses tercets to separate individual thoughts into distinct parts. For example, the first tercet sets up the character of the little brother, and then the second tercet transitions to the little brother's own memories he had with the speaker of the poem.

As a result, my intention for this poetry collection was to experiment with different forms to see how well they add to the tension set forth in my poems. I relied primarily on line endings to signify the meanings of my pieces, but couplets and tercets for certain poems also signified certain thought patterns of the speaker throughout the entire narrative. This experimentation should represent the stream-of-consciousness of the speaker in these poems, since he wanders back and forth from the past to the present and always searches for some definite meaning at the end of each encounter with the ghosts.

Conclusion

This poetry collection is a result of a decade's worth of reflection on past experiences that I, like the medium in these poems, have tried to come to terms with in the end. I always wanted to create a narrative that expressed the importance of a

small community that some people would otherwise overlook. More important, I needed to emphasize how easily small communities—and families in those communities—can break apart when differences and troubles poison relationships. In cynical times, some people may find the nostalgic images of carnivals or parties at a café hokey. In desperate times, other people may favor that nostalgia and choose to forget the troubles that shrouded that past. Hopefully, this narrative shows that people should never forget the finer parts of life nor should they try outrunning the more troubling issues of their lives. By reflecting on those positive and negative memories, people might have a chance to move past personal obstacles. Now this is only an ideal, possibly as fictional as the ghosts and the ghost town in this narrative. Nevertheless, it is an ideal that I learned from my small town, and it is one for me, just like for the medium at the end of the narrative, that has become a reality.

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