

The Scholar's Dilemma

By Ryan Prior
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"I am not able to instruct you. I can only tell that I have chosen wrong. I have passed my time in study without experience; in the attainment of sciences which can, for the most part, be but remotely useful to mankind. I have purchased knowledge at the expense of all the common comforts of life: I have missed the endearing elegance of female friendship, and the happy commerce of domestic tenderness."

--Samuel Johnson

In 1973, at just 32 years of age and only two years after finishing his Ph.D. in English at Stanford University, Robert Hass released his first poetry collection, *Field Guide* and won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. With that honor he established himself as one of the brightest young poetic stars in America today, and set the stage for a promising career. Since then, he's served as Poet in Residence at The Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire and during that time used his U.S./U.K. Exchange Fellowship to complete his second collection, *Praise*, released this month by Ecco Press.

Praise tightens the already keen focus of his first work, and continues Hass' meditation on the relationship between a word and the object it represents. Throughout the work, Hass admits a troubling ambivalence toward his choice to lead the scholar's contemplative life, expresses a major preoccupation with images of fade and decay, and deftly articulates the poet's imperative for choosing the best turn of phrase to delicately express an action's essence in language. In doing this, he eventually negotiates a fragile compromise between thought and action, a fleeting solution to the problem of the un-lived life.

Some of the most nakedly honest lines don't come until the middle of the last poem, the 20-page "Songs for Surviving the Summer." Perhaps the numbing grind of a

decade in academia made him question the value of achieving his long sought-after goal: “The love of books is for children who glimpse in them a life to come, but I have come to that life and feel uneasy with the love of books. This is my life, time islanded in poems of dwindled time. There is no other world.” His overwhelming urge to span the gap between thought and action is haunted by an entire livelihood predicated on words echoing endlessly off each other amidst the silence of black ink on sterile white pages. This same sense of loss provides his poem “Old Dominion” its most resonant and jarring insight: “the main chance was never seized because it is only there as a thing to be dreamed of or because someone somewhere had set the old words to the old tune: we live by habit and it doesn’t hurt.”

The sad acknowledgement of the steady decay of dreams deferred and chances lost is ingrained throughout the book. Rather than call attention to it, Hass infuses the whole spirit of the book with the putrid scent of decadence with casual references that seem like topical description at first, but soon sink deeper, inseparable from the overt content of the collection. “The Beginning of September” and “Songs to Survive the Summer,” two of the longest poems (together they occupy more than a third of the book) are explicitly about the end of summer and the flickering candle of innocence.

The latter chronicles the frustration a couple feels after a boy unintentionally impregnates a girl, and corresponds to Hass’ own misgivings about discovering his own parents’ shotgun marriage after a clandestine conception, a discovery that destroyed his image of his parents’ initial blissful coupling. At first the lines, “*the sayings of my grandmother*: they’re the kind of people who let blackberries rot on the vine” seem

folksy, but they emerge altogether inseparable from his biting desire for the couple to have back the chances they relinquished in foolishness.

“Songs to Survive the Summer” begins with “these are the dog days, unvaried except by accident.” The lines use late summer to call attention to the dwindling of innocence as a childhood summer spent “guzzling Orange Crush, time endless” depreciates into a meditation on death with the lines “child, every other siren is a death,” and Hass’ attempts, through the possibility of immortality through writing, to thwart death: “That is what I have to give you, child, stories, songs, loquat seeds, curiously shaped: they are the frailest stay against our fears. Death in the sweetness, in the bitter and the sour, death in the salt, your tears, this summer ripe and overripe.”

This time around, Hass observes this slow ebbing away of time more as an active participant, not so much as neutral intellectual observer. This uneasy feeling of intellectual separateness from the vigorous life was one of the few criticisms many had of Hass’ superb *Field Guide*, and he has justifiably identified it as not just a weakness to be corrected in his poetry, but also an overriding concern of those who choose a scholarly life. He dwells on this dilemma with self-assured subtlety, finding images of lost opportunities in literature, nature, and even his own clothes. His aforementioned reflection on Chekhov translations occurs “among the shadows of late afternoon,” highlighting the image of natural decay, and while he is wearing “borrowed” tennis whites. His speaker, diminished from the exalted state of fitting into polite society’s fashion etiquette and possessing the innocent ideal of the color white, is left reflecting on a “chance” that was “never seized.”

Seizing the “chance never seized” is the ultimate goal of someone who seeks to right Chekhov’s sorrows, and Hass’ profession as a lover of books compels him to strive toward this goal through poetry by finding the closest words to chart human experience. In “Santa Lucia” he says his poet’s interest is not in “desire,” but rather, it is “the riddle of good hands...the white pages of a book...Emptiness is strict, that pleases me.” He lives his life as a blank slate onto which all the emotions and events and stimuli of the world can impress themselves: “walking in the Louvre, I was, each moment, naked and possessed.” In a poem called “Meditation at Lagunitas” that is destined to become a classic of American poetry, he chooses blackberries as the symbol of the gap between word and object, thought and action: “because there is in this world no one thing to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds, the word is elegy to what it signifies.” He wisely notes later, bringing abstruse literary theory into chatty conversation, “talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice, pine, hair, woman, you, and I.*”

Later, in “Picking Blackberries with a Friend Who Has Been Reading Jacques Lacan,” learning from his mistake of intellectual distancing in *Field Guide*, Hass makes another wise break with his book learning in favor of producing a more genuine, enduring, and enigmatic natural image as he and his friend stop talking about *L’Histoire de la verite* (about subject and object and the mediation of desire) and focus on blackberry picking, when he sees “Charlie laughing wonderfully, beard stained purple by the word *juice*...” The exhilarating linguistic possibilities of a beard literally stained by a *word* range from mysticism to the most physical pragmatism, and in this Eureka moment, Hass and his friend have accomplished the goal of uniting words with action.

Hass' scholarly life in "Meditation at Lagunitas" was plagued by the longing of remembering a lost romance and its strange connection to another longing: the desire for his childhood river. He closes the poem, saying, "There are moments when the body is as numinous as words, days that are the good flesh continuing. Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*"

Thus, in "Meditation at Lagunitas," Hass finds instances of bodies becoming as divine as mystical words, as he utters the word "blackberry," almost like a Hindu chanting. Conversely, in "Picking Blackberries," Hass finds an instance of a word becoming so potent that it is as powerful and present as any actual physical object. The overwhelming reality of that exact moment in thought transcends the Cartesian division between mind and matter, and the word becomes physical. For just a flickering celestial moment, these literary scholars can fully grasp what the Gospel writer meant when he wrote, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

These quietly mystical moments bridge the scholar's gap between thought and action that Hass lamented with the words, "This is my life, time islanded in poems of dwindled time. There is no other world." Although his life is spent in books, he has moments of transcendence that take him to the other world.