

LOOKING OUT FROM THE HEADLANDS:
THE POETRY OF WILLIAM D. BARNEY

A Senior Thesis

By

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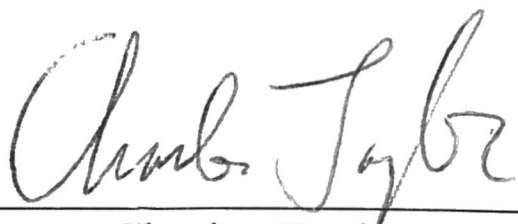
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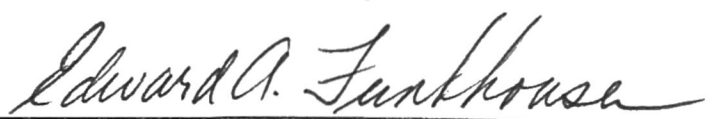
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**Looking Out from the Headlands:
The Poetry of William D. Barney**

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ABSTRACT

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A Texas poet whose work exalts the region in which he lives, William Barney (b.1916), like most poets of the state, has received only modest readership and critical notice over the course of his career. The substance and artistry of his verse, however, reveals this as oversight on the part of the literary community, and the time for a recognition of Barney's talent and contribution to Poetry is past due.

The study presented here places Barney's poetry in a literary context by assessing the inferior quality of the Texas poetic tradition prior to the emergence of Barney on the literary scene of the region; it then compares his innovative and adept techniques to the methods employed in the earlier poetry of Texas. This assessment includes an overview of approaches Barney applies to his poetic subjects, an explication of techniques, borrowed and self-formulated, which the poet weaves into his verse, and an examination of a Barney poem in light of these approaches and techniques. Ultimately, it argues to establish Barney's position as a innovator who has established a substantial and legitimate Texas tradition in poetry.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: FINDING THE KILLDEER

In the title poem of his collection **The Killdeer Crying**, William Barney writes, "He liked living up there in the cedar / and mesquite. Where he could look out long, / far over the flats" (49). Barney the poet, it seems, likes living "up there" as well; in many ways he inhabits the same kind of realm as his killdeer. He, by virtue of his being a "Texas" poet, writes in a poetic locale which is similarly remote and isolated, he too seems to "like" being a resident of such a place, and he also appears to make much of the perspective, the vantage point which the territory provides him. Most importantly, Barney, like the bird in his poem, is a figure who must be "sought out" in certain of respects. Without actively and purposefully setting out to find him, most readers will simply never discover him.

It is a result of the unassuming, subtle disposition of this poet that the reader must initially search for him. Unlike the killdeer, Barney's voice is never strident or harsh, and while its quality is certainly as unique in character as the killdeer's, one must listen closely in order to grasp and distinguish its tone and beauty. In addition to the effort required in finding and appreciating the art and artistry of Barney's poetry, one is also confronted with the task of actually obtaining copies of Barney's poems. Most of his published poetry has been printed by small presses, and those collections still in print are difficult to procure, owing to the limitations (both financial and in terms of manpower) of these small presses.

Those books which are now out of print are virtually impossible to find, and this lack of accessibility to Barney's poetry illustrates quite well the cycle which is at work with regard to much of the poetry of Texas, a cycle of limited initial circulation, resulting from initial lack of interest in "Texas" poetry, which in turn leads to a meager availability of such poetry for those who might at some point come across it and develop and an appreciation for it. In

Journal used as model for style and format is **MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers**, Fourth Edition.

short, past apathy towards poetry of the region has meant that there simply is not enough of it lying around to be picked up by those who might like it and add to its readership. As Barney writes in **A Little Kiss of the Nettle**, and as he is fond of repeating, "There are almost as many poets as rattlesnakes in Texas, but they're not as popular" (30). Thus, the reader of Barney must indeed *want* to be a reader of Barney and must have proven so through the somewhat painstaking search required to find him. Barney himself seems to understand this situation quite well; however, as is evidenced by the amount of poetry, published and unpublished, which he has written over the course of his life and continues to write, Barney has apparently found an incentive for writing poetry other than that of an appeal to a large readership. Perhaps his impetus is revealed in another passage from **A Little Kiss of the Nettle**:

Whatever portion of our being is exalted
beyond the commonplace, that is what
is meant by more than bread alone. In the welter of noise about
us,
music.
In the proliferation of ink, the sweep
of poetry.
In the thoughtless repetitive grind of existence,
the quiver of being alive. (25)

Born on April 19, 1916 in Tulsa, William D. Barney spent his early years in Oklahoma. His parents William R. and Maude L. Barney moved the family to Fort Worth in 1928 when his father found work in Texas, and the poet has lived there since. Barney's introduction to poetry no doubt came early in life, as he recalls that his parents often recited selections of nineteenth-century verse to each other. His mother, a church pianist, exposed him to music, a fact which reveals itself in an important way in the lyrical nature of his poetry. A baritone

soloist, Barney was directed by his mother to Mary Mills, a native of Fort Worth, as an accompanist for voice lessons; the two have been married since 1936, are the parents of four sons, and live together in the Fort Worth home they have shared for almost sixty years.

William Barney attended Texas Christian University after high school but ended his academic career after only one term at the institution, partly because of the economic hardships of the times and partly because he did not wish to delay his intended marriage to Mary. Barney began his career with the Postal Service in 1936 as a substitute clerk; in 1941 he moved up to clerk in the Inspection Service, and in 1943 he rose to the position of Post Office Inspector. His position as Inspector benefited Barney's poetry tremendously, for his travels during the roughly twelve years he held this position carried him all over the state. One has only to be around Barney for a short time to discover that he is a man who loves stories; he takes great pleasure in hearing stories and in telling them, and the stories of the people and places he encountered in his line of work have fashioned themselves into a large portion of his poetry. Although he eventually moved up to a position as a regional official in which he no longer traveled as extensively and then retired from the Postal Service in 1971, Barney's stories remain dear to him.

As Dave Oliphant correctly points out in his introduction to the first edition of **The Killdeer Crying**, the claim that Barney's work has been universally overlooked is not entirely valid (Introduction reprinted in Oliphant, **High Horse** 64). Although the argument might rightly be made that a body of work such as this is deserving of much more attention than it has received, Barney has received a number of noteworthy awards for his poetry. He was a co-winner of the Borestone Mountain Award for 1952, has received two Texas Institute of Letters awards, and was awarded the Kaleidograph Book Award. A past president of the Poetry Society of Texas (1951-52), he has won several of its awards, and his **Long Gone to Texas** received the Nortex Book Award for 1982. Barney has received five major awards of the Poetry Society of America, among them the Robert Frost Memorial Award, which he received from Robert Frost himself in 1962 for his "The Killdeer Crying". Finally, he was

appointed Poet Laureate of Texas for 1982-83 by then Governor Bill Clements as a result of the recommendations of five Texas literary organizations.

Barney's work includes nine published collections. Two of these, **A Little Kiss of the Nettle** and **In a State of Euphorbia**, are collections of aphorisms, a form at which Barney is extremely adept and of which is quite fond. His most recent publication, **Words from a Wide Land**, assembles notes and brief descriptions, many of which eventually became poems, in a quote-for-the-day format. A long narrative poem, **Luella**, and a dramatic poem, **The Happy Land**, are among the large amount of unpublished poems he has written, and several prospective collections of such material only await offers to be printed.

Perhaps at this point a note ought to be given regarding Barney's "worthiness" as a subject of scholarly inquiry. Such worthiness implies an assumption that Barney is indeed a "good" poet, and the basis of such an evaluative claim may need to be clarified. Among the factors which might establish a body of poetry as substantial or "good", one might include an ability to move the reader or elicit an intellectual or emotional response, and for this I can offer only anecdotal evidence and examples of features of the poetry which seem, from a personal perspective, to accomplish this. The criterion of the poetry's endurance over time might be used in this argument, and I submit that in Barney's case it has endured quite well over the span of the poet's career but that for the most part it is simply too soon to tell whether Barney will "stand the test of time." As yet another basis for the assessment of Barney's work as "good", one might cite the opinion of colleagues and critics in the field; in the absence of a significant amount of literary criticism on Barney, I must suggest oversight by a good many scholars and must point out the awards received by the poet and the attention given to his work by a number of Texas men of letters, including Dave Oliphant, Paul Foreman, and Paul Christensen. Finally, I include among my reasons for considering William Barney a "good" poet his innovative use of language. My hope is, first, that the features of Barney's poetry examined in this discussion will provide the reader with ample evidence of

Barney's artistry and his "worth" as a poet, and, second, that their presence in his body of work will justify this and future studies.

This study of William Barney's poetry is admittedly somewhat broad; at the same time it is not all-encompassing, and perhaps some explanation needs to be given regarding this. Given the amount of criticism on Barney currently in existence (There is, sadly, very little.), it seems that our most pressing need is that of a general discussion of the poet's body of work. My hope is that the existence of this and other similar works hopefully to follow will form a foundation for later Barney scholarship and will spark more focused analyses of the poet's work. The scope of this discussion includes a comparison of the traditional "Texas" poetry in existence before Barney began writing to Barney's new brand of Texas poetry, an examination of form in Barney's work, an investigation of some important features of his verse (i.e. the mechanics of the poetry), and an analysis of Barney's "The Killdeer Crying". "Bedrock and Bottom", the title of Chapter II, is derived, as are the titles of all the chapters, from "Killdeer"; the image seems appropriate in contrasting older "Texas" poetry with Barney, who is not content to rest on the surface of the landscape. He seeks to look down upon the surface from a great height, to dig beneath it, to explore its very foundations. The speaker of "Killdeer" makes use of the phrase "In botany I believe"; his statement suggests an analytical, scientific mind-set marked by the need to categorize. By "Botanizing", Chapter III, I do not refer to Barney's writing on or classification of nature; rather, I refer to the kind of order found in Barney's poems and to my own categorization of them. In its task of "tracking the Killdeer," Chapter IV examines specific gestures, features, and techniques (the tracks) the poet uses as he moves through his poems, and the "slow successive sound" heard in "Killdeer" illustrates the poems appropriateness as an example of Barney's careful attention to the landscape about which he writes.

CHAPTER II

BEDROCK AND BOTTOM

The discussion here of the history of Texas poetry before William Barney's time in no way presumes to be all-inclusive or thorough; a genuinely detailed examination of the subject must be left for another time. The comments made here may involve some generalization and over-simplification and will admittedly neglect important exceptions to the claims asserted; however, the aim here is to provide a description of the prevailing state of poetry in Texas up to the time of William Barney and to compare his work to it. A.C. Greene, in his introduction to **Texas in Poetry: A 150-Year Anthology**, warns that in early Texas "there was a lot of bad poetry written" (Hill ii). He argues that then, just as today, there were Texas poets who simply turned out inferior poetry, but he asserts that examples of quality poetry can be found in early-Texas poetry. Hill, in editing the collection, has been fairly successful in choosing examples of such early poetry that have a good bit of artistic merit, as has Shockley to some extent in his **Southwest Writers Anthology**; nevertheless, a few clinkers do find their way into the mix, owing to the vast amount of poor poetry dating from the early history of the state. Further, a compilation like the 1913 collection of Texas poems edited by Davis Foute Eagleton provides a more representative view of early Texas writing and illustrates the distance William Barney has traveled from the typical "Texas" writers who came before him.

While a good deal of time might be spent in defining the term "Texas writer", we need not concern ourselves much with that here other than to say that I will suggest that Barney is one of the first truly "Texas" poets. Living most of his life in the state and writing almost exclusively about it, Barney sticks out as one of the first to truly examine the region in which he lives and to write from within that region. Barney's predecessors include poets who were born outside of Texas and moved there later in life (some of whom wrote about Texas and some of whom did not) and poets whose subject matter is Texan but who themselves visited Texas only briefly. The criteria of place of birth, place of residence, or poetic subject matter

certainly play a role in determining whether a poet deserves inclusion among the writers of the state, but the main point to be made here is that even those pre-Barney poets who made their homes in Texas for all or most of their lives or who wrote about Texas subjects seem, in most cases, to see the region (if they see it at all) through the eyes of an outsider who never adequately comes to terms with the uniqueness of the region.

Among the types of poems found among early Texas poets, one finds a kind of pat and stilted nature poetry which comes across as no more than transplanted English or New-England poetry. Take for example these lines from "The Dew-Bell" written by Harve Preston Nelson, a poet born in 1872 who lived in Texas from the age of four.

When the dew-bell's on the rose bush,

I hear the welcomed strain,

The mock-bird tide

Rise far and wide--

The sweet notes of the rain,

The raptures fine or riotings

Along the blossomy lane.

When the dew-bell's on the rose bush,

The stars blaze through the deep,

The mock-bird sings

The blessed things

Where splendored poppies sleep

Entranced with smoke-like purplings

That from the sunset sweeps. (Eagleton 336*)

* Because of an absence of printed line numbers in most sources of poetry quoted here, particularly the sources of Barney's poetry, and because of the resulting lack of clarity regarding line numbers in the more loosely-structured verse, numbers in verse documentation refer to page number, not line number.

Very little in this poem lets us know that we are actually in Texas; the "mock-bird" reference aside, the picture painted is that of a generic kind of nature which could be placed almost anywhere. The end-stopped lines and predictable rhymes, together with trite images like "The sweet notes of the rain," result in a tired kind of poetry which simply lacks substance. Contrast it with Barney's "Panhandle Palette."

The Herefords in no hurry, sun falling slow,
 red plowed ground in miles of dull red glow;

 round red cattle plodding on a barndoor plain,
 twilight dropping down, a carrot-colored rain;

 acres of soft copper merging to a ruddy sky,
 that rusty, rude procession of the whiteface moving by--

 has the world burned brick, in a cooling Permian haze,
 tinged with raw corrosion in these, the latest days?

 The Herefords amble past in a pale Gotterdammerung
 where saurians once waddled when light and earth were young.

(Long Gone 4)

Here the imagery is fresh and descriptive; phrases like "carrot-colored rain" and "copper merging to a ruddy sky" provide a glimpse of the uniqueness and vibrancy of the Texas landscape. Longer lines and a disruption of the iambic rhythm appropriately slow the pace of the poem and prevent any predictability in the rhyme.

Often poets of this pre-Barney period turn out gushingly sentimental poems like the one entitled "Outrage" by Judd Mortimer Lewis, portions of which I reproduce here:

...You know that other, other day
 You toddled to my door,
And called out, "papa's baby here!"
 And stamped and stamped the floor
With your wee feet, to make me come
 And ope to let you in?
I guess you have forgotten it;
 I hope so. 'Twas a sin!

And I sat still and read my book
 Until you quiet grew;
A story had me so absorbed
 I gave no thought to you!
And, when at last I oped my door
 You lay between the rooms
All fast asleep, and in your fist
 A bunch of clover blooms!...

And if I do that way again,
 Dear baby mine, by you,
When I knock on the pearly gates--
 May God not let me through!
I'm glad you have forgotten it,
 And love your daddy yet;
If I should live a thousand years
 I never shall forget! (Eagleton 204-5)

Many of those who avoided such sentimentality fell into writing with much bravado and idealization about the "glorious" and "heroic" history of Texas. A poem entitled "Old Fort Davis" includes the following stanzas:

High up in picturesque mountains,
 Way out in the Lone Star State,
 Stands old Fort Davis, abandoned;
 It's of romantic and ancient date....

It seems I hear bugles sounding.
 I wait, in expectant hush!
 I see soldiers mounting their horses;
 Now, they come forth with a rush!

No! It's only the gravestones of soldiers:
 The brave boys who fought here--and died!
 A phantom army, in review, is passing,
 I honor and salute it with pride! (Crews n. pag.)

Yet another type of early Texas poem includes a similar kind of bravado; poems of the "cowboy" variety are some of the most common among poems of this era. One such poem, which has unfortunately gained somewhat of a reputation as a quintessential Texas poem, is Berta Hart Nance's "Cattle", which begins

Other states were carved or born,
 Texas grew from hide and horn.

Other states are long and wide,
 Texas is a shaggy hide,...

Other soil is full of stones,

Texans plow up cattle-bones. (Hill 195)

Such poems do little more than play on stereotypes, and they completely avoid any attempt at a realistic portrayal of the region. If these "cowboy" poems do succeed in avoiding their hollow machismo, they often give themselves over to farcical attempts at dialect like

I shore love to play the fiddle

Nearly any time 'o day,

When I'm feelin' in the notion

An' my fiddle wants to play...(Eagleton 125)

and

Well, fellers, I've got home agin, an' it seems sorty strange

To mosey round the old corrals on this hyar lonely range. (Eagleton 103)

Barney completely avoids the time-inured myth of the cowboy in the Roy Rogers tradition. Even when they display colloquial speech patterns ("Something has skittered the cattle, / else it's to rain hard--storm--tonight," **Killdeer** 31) or when they find themselves in categorically southwestern situations, Barney's subjects are never allowed to descend to the level of stock figure or caricature. This poet's careful and complex treatment of them lends a degree of depth and a level of humanness that is simply absent in earlier poems of the region.

Although Barney seems to have been aware of the existence of several of the Texas poets of the generation before his, his exposure to and influence by them is minimal at best. However Barney avoided falling into the mire of these poets, whether out of conscious rejection of their work or merely by a lack of contact with it, his poetry greatly benefits from his distance from it, for Barney's writing has grown out of a combination of borrowing, however subtly or subconsciously, from the poetic techniques and approaches of more prominent poets of regions other than Texas and coining and devising his own poetic language and techniques.

If it is one's desire to study Barney and then draw inferences based on similarities to the poetry of other poets in American and world literature, the possibilities for comparison are virtually limitless. For example, the tightness of form, refinement, precision of language, shortness of line, and the rhyme scheme of an early Barney poem like "Plainsman" are strikingly reminiscent of Dickinson (**Kneel** 15). Another poem in the same collection, "To You My Thoughts", seems to turn in upon itself in a manner very much like Robert Graves' "A Warning to Children"; it ends, "...Am I in you confined / or you in me, we touch at every turn? / To my most secret self I move the key / and look within, where you look out at me" (24). One of Barney's finest poems, "Paluxy Episode", displays definite characteristics of Crane's Literary Naturalism. Extrapolating influences on Barney by other poets, though, proves, in most of these cases, purely speculative; Barney generally seems somewhat reluctant to divulge kinships or affinities he has felt for other writers. He does, however, avow some degree of influence by Frost, and he admits to an admiration of Yeats' poetry which he does not delegate to a position of conscious emulation.

If Barney has not consciously sought to follow Yeats, his liking Yeats' poetry is certainly understandable, for the two share common ground with regard to certain rhythmic aspects of their poetry. An editor says of Yeats that he

developed ways of bringing the movement of common speech and impassioned argument into a supposedly conventional verse-form...[and] substituted [the] movement [of common speech] for the conventional one as the dominant element in [his] rhythm, while preserving the enormous advantages of the patterned structure of traditional verse. (Sanders, et al I-3)

Barney's "disruption" of basic iambic meter follows this description precisely, and its effect is similar to that achieved by Yeats. Dougherty comments on Yeats' "control of lineal tempo" as allowing him to "introduce into the regular movement of the rhythm the pronounced quickening (by the increase of unstressed syllables between stressed peaks) or the deliberate slowing (by the juxtaposition of strong stresses) that is characteristic of his verse" (22). The

kind of control of pacing described here is observed in Barney at his best, particularly in such works as "The Killdeer Crying".

Though Barney surely displays no dependence on the poetry of Robert Frost, there are a good many things the two have in common; perhaps one might better use the term parallels to relate to two poets. Something might be made of the fact that both were actually born outside of the region with which their poetry is connected, and thus both had the experience of "discovering" these regions. Beyond that, the two share, very obviously, an affinity for "nature" poetry, and both frequently employ the strategy of marveling at some natural phenomenon and then implying some deeper meaning which it reveals. Further, what Kemp writes of Frost's poems applies equally as well to Barney: "Frost's best New England poems transcend the limitations of local-color writing and attain a complexity and universality not inherently regional" (13).

"Cross Timbers", from **Killdeer**, presents a Frostian treatment of a subject using Barney's own "Texas" language. The fresh description of nature in phrases like "the naked crookedness of limbs" and "rain's rough stroke" is combined with a tight, Frost-like form of heroic couplets and with the speaker's movement from personal comment (stanza 1) to a description of nature and then back to the speaker's brief commentary on the scene (stanza 10); it illustrates Barney's closeness to Frost as well as the steps he has taken in his own unique direction. Indeed, Barney appears to toy with Frost's influence with the line "what is a witness worth to any tree?" Subtle references of this kind can be found in a number of Barney's poems. By them, by the injection of local color into his poetry, particularly in poems like "Wide Eyed" and "The Day They Moved the Post Office", and by markedly "Texas" language and images, as in "Mesquite" or "Panhandle Palette", Barney sets out on his own distinct poetic path. In short, Barney has adopted some of Frost's approaches to and techniques in poetry (however intuitively), particularly those of taking the commonplace occurrences involving the natives of a region and examining them, directly or indirectly capturing the speech of the region, looking closely at the landscape of the region, and

sometimes fashioning comparisons to the human experience. He has created his own world of poetry by adding to these techniques his own unique landscape and by looking behind and beneath nature in ways Frost did not.

CHAPTER III

BOTANIZING

The American composer Alan Hovhaness once said, referring to atonal music, that "Music without a center is fine for a minute or two, but it soon sounds all the same" (qtd. by Rodda 2). Perhaps the same might be argued of pure free verse, and if so, then one can argue that Barney's conventional forms and patterns are the keys to making his poetry distinctive and possessive of its own flavor. Barney expands traditional form just enough to allow innovation while keeping it, for the most part, structured enough to retain a center. Frost's short poem, "Pertinax", which reads, "Let chaos storm! / Let cloud shapes swarm! / I wait for form," and that poet's well-known "tennis with the net down" analogy of free verse, leave no doubt about his opinion on free verse specifically and, more generally, on the role of form in poetry (Frost 308). Barney himself seems to speak directly to Hovhaness's statement above when he writes, "Form has a thousand faces. Formlessness but one" (**Euphorbia** 26). More cleverly, he writes,

No mystery at all about what happened
to the Easter Islanders, those strange people
who raised those marvelous statues.
They became interested in abstract art
and created all those rocks
you see littering the shore. (**Nettle** 31)

These attitudes about conventional form in art must be born in mind when discussing Barney's own form in poetry, but we must also remember that Barney's move toward innovation manifests itself in a certain relaxation of form, at least so far as the rigidity of Frost, and certainly the formularity of earlier Texas poets, is concerned.

The term "form", as it is used here in discussing Barney's poetry, does not refer so much to the conventional poetic formulas (i.e. sonnet, villanelle, sestina), whose historically

established patterns govern most aspects of the poem, including length, rhyme scheme, and stanza formation, as to a more implicit, underlying, and, from poem to poem, flexible attention to the ordering of a poem. Barney's concern with the form of a poem lies more with the underlying orthodoxy at the level of the line and at the level of its relation to the presence or absence of rhyme. Put simply, Barney's approach to form and its importance results most often in his creation of a form of his own for a poem and his implementation of that form. Barney notes "the commitment to form, in poetry-- / a lot like the marriage vow: it can be done without, but its lack / greatly inspires promiscuity" (*Nettle* 27). Following this analogy, we might say that in constructing his poetry Barney enjoys the trappings of the marriage ceremony but prefers to create his own ordering of the ritual, an ordering which includes some conventions, often slightly rearranged, but which usually rejects others.

Barney is by no means as adamant as Frost where form is concerned; a good many of his poems arguably qualify as free verse, and the poet does hold the opinion that his poetry has tended toward less structure in more recent years. An analysis of one of his latest collections, *Listening Back*, might disagree; nevertheless, it is fair to say that, overall, Barney has formed a compromise between comfort and convention on the one hand and innovation and an avoidance of stiltedness on the other. Barney is not preoccupied with form, only concerned with it as far as it relates to the connection of a poem's cohesiveness to its freshness. He prefers a certain amount of structure but possesses a level of prowess whereby he avoids being confined by it. Evidence of Barney's care in selecting the form of a poem is apparent in "Decussate", a piece which offers testimony that Barney's matching of form and content is nothing like haphazard. The poem begins,

There is a word which means to say
 how the green ash is articulated,
 put together in a trim way

buds and twigs in opposite pair

all so admirably executed
 they set an order on winter air.

The word says that the pairs are crossed,
 set at right angles, calibrated
 so none of ninety nicks is lost.

It says they're designed like a Roman X,
decussis, Number Ten, transmuted
 in wood by neat, Fibonacciian spec's.

See all those tridents, pitchforks, raised
 in harmonies, anthems, celebrated,
 crying, Exactitude be praised!... (**Wildness** 16)

Barney's characteristic use of variants is found in many of these lines, but his form is carefully adjusted to fit the precision and order implied by the "right angles" implied by the title. Each line continues the thought of the preceding line while appropriately changing direction or "turning right" in relation to it. An implied pause comes after almost every line that does not contain some kind of end stop, thus strengthening the sense of a change of direction. Each stanza ends with a pronounced pause so that the group of stanzas appears to branch off at right angles from the main poem; each of its lines seems to further branch off from the individual stanzas, and the pattern proves remarkably well-suited to the Roman sense of order and form suggested by the title and alluded to in the mention of the "Roman X". The last line quoted above, with its initial reversed foot which draws the reader in to the perfectly regular rhythm of the remaining feet, is among the most effective at suggesting the regularity and "exactitude" expressed by the poem and at finishing thought and stanza simultaneously. The stanza breaks, while appropriately shorter and more regular here than in much of Barney's

poetry, are representative of his use of them as a means of eye relief and as a signal of a change in thought; the stanza in a Barney poem, however free or structured, is almost always significant in this way.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of Barney's form is his nearness to or distance from free verse. Although he does not "split hairs" about where his poetry falls in this regard, Barney does acknowledge the significance of the distinction between free verse and blank verse. The enormous flexibility of English blank verse and the ease with which it allows variation is certainly a recognized fact in literature (Fraser 71). Frost himself commented on the existence of the variant forms of "strict" and "loose" iambic pentameter (**Robert Frost: Lover's Quarrel**), expressing his opinion that much of what many of his contemporaries termed "free verse" was actually nothing more than a loose form of blank verse. While a number of Barney's works seem almost certainly to lie within the realm of free verse, among them "Bracero", "Canticle for a Cutting Horse", and perhaps "The Killdeer Crying," a significant number of those which at first appear to fall in this category can, upon looking more closely, be described as being written in a kind of loose iambic pentameter. This "Barney Blank Verse" develops from an underlying iambic rhythm interrupted frequently by variants. Barney is not afraid to add or drop entire feet extensively in the lines of some of his blank verse poems.

One of the many representative examples of Barney's blank verse comes in **A Reach of Wildness**:

What he liked most was predicaments
 (this fellow who knew armadillos)--
 small confrontations, natural stubbornness
 of creatures, how they humble us
 who fall so arrogantly into error
 of thinking everything can be solved. He spoke
 quite easily, there on the island,

how he used to pursue, capture the beasts:
 if some sought escape by burrowing
 you always could grasp them by the tail. (12)

This first paragraph of "Predicaments" displays the continuity of thought present in a paragraph of Barney's blank verse; the paragraph following it assumes a more general or universal tone, in keeping with its first line: "Not all predicaments have a handhold." The lines above, most of which include a good bit of enjambment, carry the implication of a five-foot iambic structure. Lines three, six, and eight, however, are the only ones to closely follow the meter, including only occasional reversed feet or internal anapest substitutions. Most other lines drop a syllable and become, depending upon scansion preference, headless pentameter or tetrameter with an added syllable. Line four loses an entire foot and becomes pure iambic tetrameter. Again, the assumption of iambic pentameter verse bubbles just beneath the surface here, but the disruption of the meter by variant feet and by shortened or lengthened lines (akin to a composer's inserting an asymmetrical measure in the middle of a conventional melodic gesture) serves Barney's end of bringing the language of his poetry closer to natural speech.

Barney expresses a dislike of the brand of free verse which employs lines of greatly varying length, but he shows no great aversion to free verse generally. He does, however, point out what he considers to be its place in relation to traditional poetry: "Free verse has done for poetry / what photography did for painting" (*Nettle* 31). The analogy here is an interesting one and carries many implications, at least regarding Barney's view on the subject, about the nature of free verse as it relates to poetry, for it suggests that free verse, as Barney sees it, is a closely related but distinct art form. As an offshoot of traditional poetry, it has set off in its own developmental direction and has, by virtue of its move toward its specific goals, influenced the course of the parent genre by rearranging the objectives of both parent and offspring in the schism. Barney sometimes indicates a disinclination for the free verse ("A poet giving up rhyme and meter / is like a fish forgoing scales / or a bird eschewing feathers" *Euphorbia* 38.) and occasionally offers a warning to writers of free verse ("Free verse suffers

/ more often from diarrhea / than from irregularity" **Euphorbia** 38.); ultimately, however, his opinion lies closer to a kind of objective distinction of the form as separate and worthy in its own sphere:

Free verse shows an unfinished look,
 a part of its appeal. A well-rhymed poem looks complete.
 Some of that sense of completeness
 may very well be false.
 but just as often the unfinished look
 is also false: it may pretend
 by lack of structure and disorganization
 to be somehow more honest.
 The business of being honest has nothing to do
 with rhyming or not rhyming. (**Nettle** 18)

In this post-Whitmanian poetic climate in which we find ourselves, any use of rhyme in poetry is likely to draw descriptors like "conventional" and "anachronistic", if not something closer to "pat" or "hackneyed". The pressure is all the greater, then, for poets who do use rhyme to employ it with only the greatest finesse. Regardless of his opinion of free verse, Barney remains partial to the use of rhyme in poetry, perhaps using it as a means to achieve form and cohesion; but much like his relation to meter as an instrument of form, his association with rhyme indicates a pronounced control over rather than dependence on the technique. While conventional arrangements can be found in Barney's work, novel and sometimes complex patterns mark a good many poems as well, and in almost all cases one can, as Oliphant so appropriately indicates when discussing one of Barney's pieces, "hardly hear the poet at work" (**High Horse** 67). The care Barney takes in his rhyme is evidenced, not only in his work, but in his comment, "A man who inverts and distorts / the natural order of speech, to achieve rhyme, / may also pervert sincerity / so as to give the appearance of truth" (**Nettle** 35).

Poems like "Panhandle Palette", quoted earlier, and "A Rufous-Crowned Sparrow Seen Loitering Below Possum Kingdom Dam", which begins,

That dry inhabitant of clay,
of post oak copse and sandstone cliff
comes to the fence as though to say
he'd no valid objection if
we kept a distance reasonably trim--
we'd make no difference to him...(**Killdeer** 61),

provide simple enough examples of Barney's use of conventional rhyme with a predictable, repeating pattern and of his skill in using rhyme naturally. His artistry and control over the technique are clear in a more recent poem which plays with the idea of rhyme; the lines below make the connection of the technique to a character whose "face didn't match":

He was rhymed all over, enchained,
a house not divided but twained,
a marriage of angled and curved
which, where they differed, still served. (**Listening Back** 35)

This kind of reserved and subtle humour, which lines a large portion of his poetry, reminds us that though Barney approaches his craft carefully, he does not do so somberly.

Barney's frequent use of and his delight in slant rhyme present another aspect of his playfulness; even when his tone is not humorous, Barney uses half-rhyme to "toy" with the sounds in his poetry. "Song for a Boat-Tailed Grackle" provides an example of Barney's use of the technique as well as his frequent practice of creating a rhyme scheme with irregularly recurring rhyme:

As by a prying at a barrel
till the lid boards groan and give
and the cool sweet contents gurgle

poured in the plate of air

(the grackles, the boat-tailed grackles,
that morning were making love;
it was not in them to haggle
how they should sing, who might stare);

a gang of house-wreckers, or burglars
who jimmed at deep-nailed staves,
they struggled at being vocal,
tugged with their crooked bars

till something almost miraculous
broke with their utmost heave
and out of the wood came a carol,

a treble from the torn spars. (**Permitted Proof 19**)

In addition to the instances of perfect rhyme (*air/stare; bars/spars*), Barney builds in connections among the following words through slant rhyme: *give/love/staves/heave; gurgle/haggle; vocal/carol*. Even the "l" sounds of *barrel* and *grackles* seem to be played against each other, and while this and the *vocal/carol* relationship may seem too weak to assert, Barney admits a tendency to employ such strategies as rhyming weak final syllables and to creating a rhyming pair in which the rhyme is obscured by the presence in only one of the words of a final unstressed syllable (e.g. *well/teller*). The broadly spaced nature of the rhymes here seems to serve a unifying function for the poem. In general, ample evidence exists to argue that Barney's use of rhyme, both slant and perfect, goes far beyond mere adherence to tradition; the amount of thought he has given it and the skill of his frequently intricate patterns suggest that rhyme is, for Barney, yet another method of establishing form.

As discussed earlier, books published by Barney include six books of poetry, two books of aphorisms, and **Words from a Wide Land**, a book which collects prose and free verse proto-poetry into a quote for each day of the calendar year. His books of poetry range from **A Reach of Wildness**, made up almost entirely of nature poems, to **Listening Back**, whose subject matter explores, as its book jacket says, "human ties more fully." The other collections of poetry include a mix, usually leaning more heavily toward the natural, of these two types, and their scope is distinctly more regional than that of **Listening Back**. Just as it is important to point out the sense of order Barney establishes through the form of his poetry, it might also prove helpful to construct certain categories into which his poems fit, some perhaps bipartitely so. The creation of such labels may seem an academic pursuit; however, such classification benefits the Barney reader by not only adding further detail to the overview of Barney's body of work given here, but by also illustrating Barney's methods of approaching a subject and thereby aiding his understanding of Barney's world. Barney's one dramatic poem, **The Happy Land** (unpublished), focuses on a portion of the life of John James Audubon. There is a good bit about the work worth discussing, but because Barney has written no other verse plays with which to compare it and because it lacks a good many of Barney's characteristic features, including its being set in Louisiana (which is regional but not Texan), it, and a good many other constituents of Barney's poetry will be left for another time.

The remainder of Barney's poetry, then, apart from **The Happy Land**, very obviously falls under the heading of either narrative or lyric, and among the latter, perhaps the most prominent variety is the relatively short nature poem, best described as Barney's version of the idyll. Such poems engage the least plot of any of Barney's poems; their lyric nature involves a primary emphasis on description, and they are marked, to an even greater extent than other Barney poems, by an unobtrusive, and sometimes completely invisible, speaker. Barney's exhortation, "Pass through life unnoticed, yes; / but notice what you pass" (**Nettle** 41), conveys quite succinctly the poet's manner of approaching these poems. "Panhandle Palette", a prime example of the poems in this category, exemplifies exactly the kind of restraint and yet

intense visual probing which marks a Barney nature poem. Never stepping into the picture enough to use the first person here, Barney goes so far as to avoid the intrusion a verb might bring until the fourth stanza. The carefully studied images, presented in meticulously chosen words, are allowed simply to exist in their own natural realm of being for a time before the speaker gently nudges them with a rhetorical question which only suggests possible motion: "has the world burned brick, in a cooling Permian haze...?" (**Long Gone** 4). The only real action comes in the final couplet, when "the Herefords amble past." Barney's recurring theme of the timelessness of a natural setting in which prehistory becomes one with the present surfaces in the final line ("where saurians once waddled when light and earth were young"), but one finds in this poem the kind of delicacy with nature that the poet extols when he writes, "To care for the individual moment, / to hold it gently in the hands / so nothing spills--this may be more than poetry" (**Nettle** 35).

In "Rain in the Guadalupe", Barney reveals himself at one of his deepest levels of mysticism. Here he illustrates the degree to which he understands and has abandoned himself to the Texas landscape, and here also he displays his distance from the practicality of Frost. The conceit, which is deliberately destroyed in the last sentence,

These lovers fused
are not lovers at all,
only

blue stone
blue rain,

is extremely powerful, strong enough, in fact, to almost survive the poet's razing of it (**Long Gone** 7). The poem, characteristically distilled and vivid, contains an underlying tension and energy strikingly similar to Barney's description of the machinations of human thought:

The fantasy within the mind
is neither drama nor narrative,

and it is not spoken in any person
 known to grammar. Nor is it articulate:
 it issues, dissolves like the changing light of sunrise.
 How can we comprehend such pageantry?
 The syntax runs too subtle for our parsing.

The form of Barney's idylls ranges from the looseness of "Guadalupes", whose lack of rhyme and widely variant line length places it among Barney's few true free verse poems, to a poem like "The Sky Lets Go of Light", which, like "Guadalupes", is from the **Long Gone** collection. "Sky Lets Go" makes use of basic iambic tetrameter quatrains, whose fourth line drops a foot, and a regular, but subtle, **x a x a** rhyme scheme. The common features of these and all Barney's nature poems include relative brevity and distilled language, and usually, but not always, a withdrawn speaker and a close, sometimes mystical observation of the landscape.

In many respects the antithesis of his nature poetry, Barney's narrative poems also make up a significant amount of his poetry, and a number of these narratives have, like many of the idylls, proven themselves substantial works. As one would expect, they are usually of considerable length in comparison to poems in the other categories described here. Like those of Frost, Barney's narratives usually tell a brief story and thus involve a fairly prominent plot, and they, again like Frost's, ordinarily focus on one or a small number of characters at whom the reader's attention is directed. In contrast to Frost's narratives, though, Barney occasionally uses lines of much greater length than that of traditional five-foot blank verse (for example "Bracero") and Barney's poems involve a good bit more narratorial description than those of Frost, which generally unfold as narrative dialogues.

Another brand of lyric poem Barney writes often and with great effect, the "snapshot" or "frozen moment" poem, usually offers a glimpse into the lives of the natives of Texas. These poems commonly provide a character sketch by presenting a native in a more or less typical situation; incites are offered into the character's manner of speech, thoughts, and

philosophies through his or her actions, actions which appear to be basically representative. The length of these pieces varies quite a bit but in most instances lies somewhere between those of the nature poems and the narratives. They most often involve little story line; any specific action contained in them is only described in the past tense.

Take as an example "Sharecropper Country" from the **Long Gone to Texas** collection; the "two dozen times he moved" refers to action completed in his indefinitely distant past. All other action, for instance his father "always picking a spot for a storm cellar" and his mother "peeling off wallpaper," has occurred many times before but does not happen as we read the poem. We are therefore provided with a composite photograph of the main character's past life, but this picture is static rather than dynamic and is meant to inform the reader rather than carry him through an event. This is not to say that this type of poem is necessarily uneventful or that all poems which belong in this category include this degree of motionlessness; in fact, most do involve some amount of action, albeit limited. The distinction to be made, though, lies between this kind of action and the plot of the narratives. The snapshot poem "Applesmell" (also from **Long Gone**) presents in her own words an old woman's memory of a wagon once full of apples as it creaked down a road in her youth. While the cart does make its way "down from Cowntown," the actual event, which has happened in the past, fades into the background of the poem as the speaker describes her memory of its smell and loses herself in speculation and contemplation of her own thoughts at the time. The action, then, becomes vague and general as the poem attempts to paint a portrait of the character rather than the event she begins recounting. Colloquialisms like the woman's exclamation "Lord love you," or , in "Sharecropper Country", "He'd seen a slew of weather" suggest the indigenous language of these characters without descending into dialect.

A final type of lyric poem found among Barney's work might perhaps best bear the label "personal experience poem". Its most distinguishing characteristic is the presence of a more prominent speaker than is found in most Barney poems, a speaker who describes nature or an event he experiences and then reveals his thoughts on it. While the subject matter often

includes an object or situation in the natural world, it just as often involves people or, as in the case of "The Hill Country Post Office", a particular place. To say prominent by Barney standards does not imply a heavy-handed or imposing presence as one might arguably find in certain of Frost's poems. Barney's speaker still bears a level of humility and reserve, even at his most salient.

A prime representative of this type of poem, "The Pier Walks Outward", finds the speaker, in his sleep, observing a pier as it "walks outward into night on lank indistinguishable legs " (**Long Gone** 21). A poem like this, while containing elements of mysticism, distances itself from Barney's idylls because of the prominence of its speaker whose presence seems to initiate the events of the poem; he is the center of the scene as "some phosphorescent creature...slides his cold candles past my clouding eye." When he says in the final sentence, "From where I sleep the pier is peril, a footbridge feeding the sea's wallowing keep," his assessment of the scene is revealed, and the visions he describes are subjected to his interpretive biases. Amid the characteristically vivid images in this Barney poem, we now find phrases like "without haste" and "cold candles". In addition to sensual imagery, an emotional dimension is added directly to the poem, for we can now, through the speaker, absorb something like, in the case of this poem, a sense of the ominous. While a level of universality is lost in this kind of subjection, a degree of humanness surfaces with which the reader can readily connect.

Among the above poems we must include those in which the speaker assumes the role of seasoned philosopher. Often withdrawing from nature in poems like these, he usually reflects on some memory or event from his past or shares with us some influence drawn from a presumably long and instructive life. These poems are to be found sprinkled in among much of Barney's poetry, especially in his latest book **Listening Back**, the title poem of which is a perfect example of the type. An older poem, "A Little Learning", illustrates a slightly different kind of "personal experience" poem.

If I had known when I was young

not what I know now, but what I know
 to be worth knowing, infinitely--
 knew that, the way still to go;

starting out fresh, my head still clear,
 I could have stocked it with fine goods:
 light from old lamps picked up for a song
 in certain discoverable neighborhoods:

names and orders of ancient weeds,
 the clock of the seasons ticking bloom,
 constellations, ecologies,
 the grasses' wax, the beetle's plume.

A little late I learn a little;
 the earth distantly smiles at me,
 yields a small crumb out of a store;
 sooner, I might have seized the key.

Ignorance is the weakest crime,
 next to that, being slow:
 taking a whole life to find out
 what any child ought to know. (**Killdeer** 58)

Barney's sense of observation and freshness of imagery is present here as always in phrases like "light from old lamps picked up for a song," and "the clock of the seasons ticking bloom," but the perspective is markedly personal and the speaker quite prominent. The inference given in the first six lines, which he has drawn from some life experience, is illuminated and

expounded in the middle of the poem using details and examples, and, as with many of these poems, the end of the poem broadens to express a general truth Barney has gleaned from the reflection. It is the sense of sincerity and unpretentiousness underlying all of Barney's verse that surfaces most strongly in the simple wisdom of these poems.

CHAPTER IV

TRACKING THE KILLDEER

The "tracks" which Barney leaves throughout his poems, the evidence that he has lived in the world of the poetry, are always, as has been noted earlier, quite delicate and inconspicuous. The refinement of Barney's techniques is indeed an important key to his success, and this refinement begins with Barney's very approach to his poetic subjects and continues through his use of language. To truly appreciate the killdeer's voice, we must seek out and analyze the tracks he has left, identify the gestures and movements they delineate, and ultimately use them to gain a position nearer to him. In doing so we find not only a better vantage point from which to listen but a better understanding of the context in which he sounds his voice.

Barney urges in a passage from *Nettle*, "Let the poem show / a little emotion, / like a woman showing a little / of whatever anatomy is in style," and his method of writing does exactly that--it shows a *little* emotion (*Nettle* 36). While there is almost always a level of warmth and tenderness in a Barney poem, the poet remains intensely careful not to allow sentimentality to creep in; his movement toward a subject, then, is made with feeling, but also with delicacy and restraint.

"The Likeliest", a poem detailing a woman who must build a coffin for and bury the son she has lost to "the fever", shows Barney's control even when dealing with the most touching of subjects. The emotion felt by the speaker, who very wisely speaks from behind the poem, is implied, never overtly revealed, and the simplicity and reserve of such lines as "...she rose tall, staring / too hard to cry, or maybe to past caring" and the final "But she / didn't listen anymore. / It couldn't let her hear her own tears fall. / She didn't listen, anymore at all" lend a starkness doubly stirring for its absence of a deliberate call for sympathy (*Long Gone* 33). The potentially maudlin subject of quail chicks abandoned when the speaker frightens away their mother is handled with equal delicacy and restraint. Rather than clouding

the poem with gushing description of the forsaken and probably doomed creatures, Barney describes the events which cause the abandonment, and then presents the main character's quandary over picking a tomato and risking frightening the mother quail away from her nest or leaving it and risking its crushing the newly-hatched quail. Instead of showing us the tear he has shed for them, Barney quietly and composedly generalizes about the tragedy: "Worlds touch only an instant, and even to glimpse is to intrude" (*Killdeer* 55).

At the center of Barney's fundamental approach to a poem lies his keen sense of observation; as he says, "First you must teach your eyes; / then your eyes will teach you" (*Nettle* 46). Many of the entries in his *Words from a Wide Land*, and the poems which grew from them, illustrate the manner in which Barney observes what he finds around him, jots down a brief description of it, and later returns to his notes to flesh out what he has encountered and give more consideration to it. Whether the subject is a phenomenon of the natural world or a character Barney has run across in his travels, the poet's approach is almost always one of intense yet unmeddlesome surveillance. His method of drawing out and focusing on subjects is expounded in this passage:

Where do all these strange fish come from?
 I dip into the aquarium and there it lies
 in the net, gasping and finning, a creature
 I did not know existed before I pulled it out.
 The water is all too murky: I can see things move
 but can't tell what they are until I scoop them up. (*Nettle* 22)

When the subject being observed is human, the act of scooping it up frequently becomes a work in character study, or even of psychological analysis, as with "Applesmell", "The Constable from Soon", or "A Look at John Streich"; and Barney's love of stories, which often allows Barney to observe the image he is presented through a story even when he cannot see a character first-hand, is the impetus for these character studies.

Some of the nature poems involve a kind of character study themselves, as in the poem "The Courtship" (from the **Reach of Wildness** collection), which studies the actions and presumed thoughts of Black Widow spiders in their mating ritual, or with the snail in "Threshold", with his "footstep on the threshold of magnificent stairs" (**Killdeer** 32-3). Many nature poems, however, particularly those which do not involve this kind of characterization, begin with Barney's speaker in mid-speculation. Unlike Frost in a poem like "In Winter in the Woods...", who seems to prefer to begin by making his ingress into the woods, to describe his actions there, and then to contemplate the situation, Barney's usual method of approaching his nature poems involves the reader's finding him already at work reflecting on a scene. A few poems, for instance "The Summons", in which we "turn the path" and discover a fragrance with Barney before he provides his thoughts on the milkweed that produced the fragrance, allow us to encounter a subject with the poet, but most, like "The Sky Lets Go of Light", whose first sentence reads "Sumach set fire to limestone mountains; / cold flows down in copper pools ; about their feet," immediately expose the scene to be treated in the poem (**Long Gone** 16). Perhaps Barney asserts his control over his poetry in this manner by establishing our newcomer status which contrasts to the speaker's (even when he is least prominent) relative familiarity with the scene.

A final characteristic of Barney's approach to subject matter, Barney's use of rhetorical questions marks much of his work; in fact, very few of his poems do not use this device. These questions serve a number of different purposes in the poetry, but their general presence is indicative of Barney's basic method of looking at a subject. One of his most basic responses to an encountered subject is that of inquisition, and through this sort of mental interrogation, he probes, analyzes, and ruminates on the object or scene at which his focus is directed. Among the specific uses of the rhetorical question, one often finds the device serving in one of Barney's clever and provoking clenchers, as in "on Greer Island a Copperhead Lies Slain": "This Ichabod has left us poorer. / Where shall we turn for simple terror?" (**Killdeer** 45). Many times the technique is a means by which Barney's speaker can approach a situation and

peer more closely into it, as is the case with the question from "A Moment's Net", "is it envy recalls to my mind that cast of a circular net?" (**Long Gone** 22). Sometimes its role is twofold; the question found in the first stanza of "Summoned", "how is it he of the swift, timely drop must lurch aloft with a lame, hasty hop?" allows the poem to zoom a bit closer in on its subject and also presents an example of irony about which the speaker is curious. This poem's second rhetorical question, "Who would have thought a buzzard loved life so he would rise like Lazarus, and go?", again expresses the speakers' puzzlement over a paradox while serving a function as a clever and pithy final clincher.

It is through his use of language that William Barney most reveals his artistry, and by it he leaves his most distinctive marks on his poetry. One of his most striking features, Barney's imagery comes from the combination of a sharp eye and an uncommonly attuned ear. His faithfulness and attention to what he sees is of paramount importance in his art, as he suggests:

If I deliberately set about the training
of a poet-to-be (and automatically almost
something within me says, God forbid!)
one of the things I'd require
would be that he learn to draw. No better way
can be found to sharpen an eye.
He could even become so enamored
we might lose the poet and gain a painter.
It would be better to have him see straight
than if he never wrote another word. (**Nettle** 18)

Such attention to physical surroundings, coupled with a highly innovative poetic lexicon and a striking ability to adapt language to fit his needs, culminates in images like "copper-coopered smoldering band" and a reference to mesquite flowers as "yellow lingerie" (**Killdeer** 45; **Long Gone** 24). A poem like "Cross Timbers" is rife with stark, clear images such as

"haggard rain," "a gray hanging stain," and "a green catbrier drawn like wretched wire," which work because they are at once unusual, pointedly descriptive, and aurally effective (**Killdeer** 15). No idealization or artificial beautification of nature is to be found in a phrase like the poem's last sentence, "But I have need of stark, uncomely goods / got only in the ruin of wet woods," but we trust that the picture painted for us is accurate, and we like the polished, ringing way Barney expresses it. He can bring us a "harrow of ice-weaned air," warm things up with a "lick of the sun," or remind us where we are with the "taste of tincup water" (**Long Gone** 44,47; **Permitted Proof** 51).

In "Dry Song", Barney displays the care he takes with the sound in his poetic world; alliterative gestures abound, as in the cicada's "stridulous song," his "rasping strong at a single surly string," and in the final stanza's pairing of "dying riddle" with "dusty rattle" (**Permitted Proof** 52). Another poem from this same book, "Country Woman Following a Tractor", provides an example of a recurrent type of imagery in Barney's poems, sea imagery which is dropped into the inland landscape of Texas. In this particular poem, the imagery is introduced through an allusion to Penelope, who "trails a ship," and a mention is made of the "tide's wild rip" (43). Here a suggestion is made, which is more strongly asserted in other poems, of the dispelling of the separation by time of the present Texas landscape at which Barney is looking and the Texas covered by ancient seas. "The Tapering Off" makes for a clearer connection between the two landscapes with references to "great flat-bottomed hulls," "the armada of receding keels," and to "approaching a [remote] continent" (**Long Gone** 3). "Comanche Buttes" forges the connection most strongly of all with its "impassive dykes against a vacant sea" and its speaker who cannot free himself from "the taut sense of the spent wave that lurks about this stone" and who cannot

...look to the horizon's edge

But I see there the blue-hazed even lines

Of long, truncated hills, the gaunt confines

That basin this sea-floor with broken wedge. (**Kneel from the Stone** 42)

Like Frost, Barney employs in his poetry a strategy of suggesting the speech of the region in which he writes without shifting into actual dialogue or attempting true dialect, and like Frost he accomplishes this most often by sprinkling certain regionalisms, or "Barneyisms" if you will, into the generally refined language of his speaker. By this technique, the reader gains a sense of the flavor of the region without losing respect for the speaker through excess or caricature. The extent to which these colloquial phrases reflect common Texas speech patterns and the extent to which they are purely creations of Barney's inventive mind is largely a matter for linguistic scrutiny; however, the originality which they inject into the poetry is striking. Among his favorite practices, Barney often makes use of the incorrectly formed comparative or superlative, as he does when he says "we did nothing startlinger than gawk admiringly" (**Killdeer** 61). His speaker in "The First to Leave" gives the line, "I don't know rightly where," and "The Panther Possible" quotes a native's utterance, "Something has skittered the cattle, / else it's to rain hard--storm--tonight" (**Permitted Proof** 46; **Killdeer** 31).

Barney's seems to enjoy toying with parts of speech in the ways that Texas speech patterns often do:

Words, like people, never know for sure
 what they mean; they are always wriggling about
 uncomfortably, trying to adjust
 their intentions to their circumstances. (**Nettle** 26).

By promoting their "wriggling", Barney adds a level of authenticity and color to poems into which he has dropped his brand of implied dialect. Take, for example, the line, "It always limps when it would fly," (**Listening Back** 27), and from "Whittle", "the blade glides deft," and "this ...is idle whittle...futile employ" (**Kneel** 43). Perhaps Barney explains the value of the method best: "Like parts of the body the parts of speech have their powers. Sometimes

the flavor of language counts more than the calories" (Nettle 6). This technique works well with Barney's occasional coining of new words like "woolgatheringly" and "gothicwise"; together they create a language that is both novel, owing to the originality of such usage in the context of poetry, and comfortable in their tendency toward quaintness and realism.

CHAPTER V

THE SLOW SUCCESSIVE SOUND: AN ANALYSIS OF "THE KILLDEER CRYING"

William Barney remarks that he does not "get too many calls" for "The Killdeer Crying" when reading his poetry to an audience, and despite its supplying the title for his third published collection of poems, he does not hold it among his very favorite poems. The poem does, however, contain a number of features which deserve discussion, and while it cannot be claimed as representative of Barney in all respects, its typicality in certain areas is clear; moreover, those areas in which it proves atypical of Barney's poetry serve a useful counterpoint through which to discuss Barney's usual poetic methods. Despite the poet's own feeling toward the poem and the coolness with which Barney readers have apparently received it, one can, I think, legitimately argue that it holds a substantial position among Barney's body of work and provides a fitting reference point from which to examine the poetry.

"Killdeer", as do many substantial works of literature, allows a significant amount of room for individual interpretation, a result of Barney's "speaking in ambiguous," as he puts it. I would argue that at least two interpretations of the text are possible. The poet's own comments suggest that his intended scenario involves three figures; the non-italicized text represents an interchange between a deranged man who has taken to living out alone somewhere on the Texas prairie and the "old law hound" who ventures out to bring him in to tow. The deranged man hears the killdeer and listens for the sound to which the killdeer claims to listen. A second scenario, the one about which I find the most to say and on which I base my discussion here, and one which I assert the text supports equally as well, includes only two figures out among the headlands. The "law hound" is a "Seeker", searching for the killdeer, who has him "working shinnery and trash" in his search. All of the indirect dialogue, which the Seeker reports to us, is exchanged with the killdeer himself, and the text Barney places in italics is the speech we, as the reader, hear delivered directly from the killdeer to the

Seeker. In this version the killdeer is the one who "likes living up there," who offers the word "headlands", and at whom the speaker's attention is focused.

The type of poem we find in "Killdeer" is something of a hybrid; the closeness to and focus on the Texas landscape tend to place it with the lyric nature poems. Its precise, refined language and the passages which reflect the speaker's musing about the scene in which he finds himself (e.g. "Cedar does things / to a person. A man oughtn't live out alone in the cedars. / I say that.") seem to indicate this as well, but the poem's length, its implicit plot, and the presence of dialogue suggest a likeness to the narratives. Additionally, the inclusion of fragments of idiomatic speech, the elements of a character sketch present in the discourse, and the underlying feeling that the thoughts and actions presented are "representative" of the figure(s) involved argue that it belongs among those I have termed "snapshot" poems. Finally, the presence of a relatively prominent speaker who describes and comments on an event in which he is involved brings it closer to Barney's "personal experience" lyrics. The complexity and artistry of the poem begins with this blending of elements, but it certainly does not end there.

From the outset the speaker reveals his nativeness; the very first lines of the poem are his: "He wasn't easy fooled. Not I was fooling / anybody, it was more deciphering." The colloquial substitution of the adjective "easy" for its adverbial counterpart lends a regional flavor while maintaining a subtlety that keeps the character credible, and Barney's omission of the relative pronoun in an unusual place ("Not (that) I was fooling"), a somewhat frequent occurrence in Barney's poems, adds a freshness while furthering the poem's regional tint. The speaker takes careful note of the images around him, describing the "white galls...in this calloused land" and pointing out the surrounding "cedar and the mesquite" to further establish the setting. While the "seeker" begins his attempt to draw out the killdeer, he finds an initial reluctance from the bird, who is "suspicious" and appears to ask why the speaker has come to "nitpick him." The poem's focus is turned to the sound, the "stuttering, / the subrosa rasping, the white-undersided remarking / of cottonwoods," to which the killdeer claims he is listening.

The "seeker" seems to speak for the rational, the analytical, the practical mode of thought, and his observation of the killdeer, who continues looking out from his headlands "across the flats" and listening to the "eternal sound", prompts him to say, in a slightly off-center and wry Barneyesque phrase, "A mind could grow / monotonous with them [the sources of the sound] all about." The killdeer finally speaks directly (We have hitherto only had *reported* to us by the speaker what the killdeer says or suggests.) in the ninth paragraph of the poem, and because of the italicization of his words and the smoother rhythm of his lines, which are heavily iambic with most variants adding stress and slowing the pace, his voice seems distant, calm, and ethereal. Each time he speaks, the killdeer describes the "echo of a primitive strain" he hears each time he "comes out here" to the realm in which the Seeker finds him. This "long and heavy and unhurried" sound, he implies, is the lapping waves of ancient, long receded seas around the "great bare capes" of the land. The connection made here, which Barney has constructed before, between the present Texas landscape and the prehistoric shoreline which once covered it is strengthened by references made by the speaker to "plowing...[like] an ancient snail, scrawling along the bottom of a huge bowl, a tremendous basin" and to the killdeer's "crying for all the world like sea-lost gulls."

Between the killdeer's speeches, the Seeker interjects ideas which reflect his conventional, analytic mind-set by referring to "pathology", by announcing his tenet, "I believe in botany and very simple explanations for almost anything," and by references to such matters as "free speech" and "guilt". This structured, conventional thought process appears to be breaking down, however, as the speaker spends more time out on the headlands with the killdeer, for we find that into his practical discourse creep remarks about a farmer who got thin milk and about the killdeer himself "crying in the uplands, on the sand bars, in the stony fields...like sea-lost gulls." Finally, our Seeker appears to descend into a kind of confusion when he speaks of "All this talk while a man is sick, to death, / dangerous death." The poem ends in a gesture which seems to "fade out" as the speaker repeats fragments of lines appearing earlier in the poem; the killdeer's voice, too, is heard among these lines, repeating

his avowal, "I know what I hear," and the speaker, whose focus has dissolved to the point that he omits the final word "profession" when he echoes "it's not my chosen," leaves the reader with the image of the "killdeer crying like gulls."

This last image strikes an important ending chord, for it reinforces Barney's theme of the timelessness of the landscape, which he establishes by digging beneath the surface of what he sees and revealing the region's universal and fundamental character. This basic, underlying character is unveiled by presenting both layers, present and primordial, at once in a kind of double exposure. Here, Barney's sense of mysticism and intimacy with the land reaches a pinnacle. Another of his *Nettle* passages reads,

I never wished to be a shape-shifter,
but to be a shape-knower
in the green pageantry of Earth,
that would be sorcery indeed (37),

and Barney undeniably shows himself, through the sorcery of "Killdeer", to be a knower of the shapes of his landscape. One might argue that the killdeer is nothing more than a manifestation of the creative, the spiritual, the intuitive, the artistic lurking beneath the surface of the outwardly rational speaker, and if so, then perhaps his ultimate state of confusion results from the attempt to bring the two spheres into a kind of balance. Whether or not one draws this inference, it is clear that Barney, in listening, through his killdeer, to the "slow successive sound" of the land, has acquired in his poetry both an intimate knowledge of the region and the level of artistry necessary to convey its beauty and depth.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE HEADLAND DWELLER

If we have searched for the killdeer, followed him out among his limestone slabs, and tracked his movements for a short time in this discussion, it must be hastily added that we have only begun to fully know him. We have not yet reached bedrock and bottom in his realm, have only caught the briefest suggestion of his cry. The depth and breadth of his land requires much more time and attention than can be given here, and the aim of this survey of the creature only professes to report a sighting of him and to pinpoint his whereabouts on whatever map best displays his position. By offering location and cursory description, it hopes to prompt others to seek him out for closer watching.

Barney's poetry is innovative and substantial because it goes beyond a mere reporting of the physical plane on the surface of the poet's surroundings. Like Frost, Barney looks beyond this; in his nature poems, he observes some natural phenomenon and implies or elicits some deeper meaning that can be connected to the human experience, and in those poems concerned with the human fixtures in Barney's region, a sincerity, accuracy, and depth of understanding marks the poetry's treatment of its subject. A subtle and unique beauty of expression distinguish the whole of the poetry. The depth of analysis Barney's work allows and the artistry of its poetics establish it as a body of poetry whose quality serves its region well. Indeed, Texas has need of such a poet as William Barney, whose writing marks the arrival, if somewhat belated, of a genuine and substantial Texas tradition in poetry.

From where he stands on his headlands, Barney, through his poetry, looks out across his calloused land. Jutting out into the ancient, vanished sea, he listens to its distant, rhythmic echo and sweeps his gaze back and forth from its primeval waves to the mainland from which he came. His step out alone onto the headlands places him in at the convergence of two realms; he steps away from the conventional enough to grasp the mystical while remaining grounded enough to avoid becoming lost in the landscape. Barney, then, is the killdeer whose

cry speaks of what he has learned from his vantage point, who tells of the wonder he finds "out here." His cry invites us to venture out in search of him and hear what he has learned from this land, and his territory is not of a kind to be harmed by human incursion.

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