

CANYON BOYS

By Tyler Mitchell

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
The Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing

Northern Arizona University

May 2022

Approved:

Sherwin Bitsui, MFA.

K.T. Thompson, Ph.D.

Nicole Walker, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

CANYON BOYS

TYLER MITCHELL

My first creative writing sample came in the form of a short story, written when I was in the third grade. The story itself followed a young child, lost amongst an animal farm, on the search for his missing teddy bear. What I remember next, was a poem, a haiku written in sixth grade about a bat. For years, I've thought about stories I've always wanted to tell, coming of age stories, horror stories, stories about my family, all inspired by storytelling within my family. It wasn't until college under the guidance of Diné poet Orlando White, that I would first learn about Diné poetics, and literature. White introduced myself and other Diné students to his own poetry and writers like Sherwin Bitsui, Laura Tohe, and more. I've always held an interest in creating my own stories, but it was this experience that grew my admiration of poetics, and poetry's ability to teach about love, history, and healing.

During my time here at Northern Arizona University, I've chosen multiple classes that allowed me to study Indigenous literature. This genre often focuses on eco poetics and location-based storytelling, often dealing with historical events and the ways that generations of people survive. My experience with writing has always been informed by Indigenous authors and so my own writing is often based in landscape focusing on setting to tell a story.

Canyon Boys is a collection of poetry influenced by my hometown of Chinle, particularly my time growing up in and around Canyon De Chelly. As a Diné, I am always connected to the Canyon and this connection is felt within stories shared and experienced by my family as well and our stories as a family and as Diné people are shared throughout this collection. As a Diné male, I look toward my own male relatives for advice in growing. These past few years at NAU

have turned me to think about my brother, my father, my grandparents and how their lives have influenced mine. This collection features several poems dedicated to these individuals to inform myself and readers of our identity as Diné men. The landscape that these characters interact in are often sandstone cliffs, cornfields, within huge red and brown canyon walls all influenced by the canyon's influence as a place of survival, war, removal, returning, and healing. With this work I want to illustrate the experience of a Diné individual and what lessons can be learned when one reflects on their relationships with family, loved ones, and the landscape they choose for themselves.

Canyon De Chelly is significant to Diné people as it served as their homeland for thousands of years. It has also more recently served as a place of refuge for Diné hiding out during the forced relocation of southwestern tribes seen at the hands of the U.S. Government. There are stories of trauma as well as healing that people remember the Canyon for. Diné Poet Laureate, Laura Tohe has written about this extensively in her poetry. Her poetics inform us how landscape is essential to Diné identity and can be used a reference point for others as a way to navigate their own identity. I write poems to showcase stories and moments I experience as a Diné male and how each instance, no matter how small or brief, can offer healing and understanding of my cultural identity. Women are vital in any culture, especially Diné culture and their presence is felt heavily in community efforts of storytelling and healing. These past few years I have felt a lack of this guidance in the Diné community and in my own familial structures when thinking of the male individuals. I want to attribute my own understanding of healing and communicate my own struggles through my poetry, as a way to begin conversations for healing within my family. In writing poems dedicated to individuals and the landscapes which influence me, I explore that level of kinship, of connecting to my community through storytelling.

Though inspired by the narrative storytelling of Laura Tohe and Luci Tapahonso, I feel my strengths often come in imagery heavily influenced by writers like Sherwin Bitsui and Orlando White. These writers have served as my poetry teachers over my years of Undergrad and Graduate studies and their image-based poetics have given me insight as to how poetry can illustrate landscape, and how that landscape, given the time to tell the story, can offer guidance to historical events, generational healing, and powerful instruction into Diné identity. I want my poetry to be seen as a guide to healing, how our relationships to others especially landscape can influence our identity. These short moments of memories, of raw landscape and tradition, have helped me immensely to grow as an individual, and showcasing them through poetics provides me a way to connect back to my community. With love and honesty, this collection and others in the future will be dedicated to my fellow canyon boys.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	v
How We Turned to Canyons	1
Blizzards	2
Kiln	3
Glass-Stained Mountains	4
Premier	5
Yawn	6
Guilt Trip	7
iiya	8
Good Warriors	9
You Come from Canyon	10
Ultrasound	11
I Start the Year in Melting Cars	12
Fire	13
Sharpened	14
Petroglyph	15
Sweat Lodge	16
Barbed Wire Fathers	17
Stray	18
Desert Boy	19
I've never sweated mud	20

Love in Spare Time	21
1868	22
Healing, Rock Deep	23
Glass Sight	24
Scarecrow	25
Gagi	26
Ammo	27
Hammerhead	28
Shepherds	29
Broken Nights	30
Father's Poetry	33
A House Shall Be Provided	35
Overlooks	36
Rug Birth	37

How We Turned to Canyons

There used to be water
spitting between our teeth,
its eyelashes blinked in our throats.

We told it stories about the city.
How jealous it became
to swallow our bricks and sirens
leaving us swollen with quiet.

Blizzards

Cold, childish breath froze clouds.

Wintery sprinkles

avalanche opening eyes.

I was carried once, to my father's white pickup,

Was taught to ember my iris.

But years after snow melts melting water stabs rivers between mountains.

Snowflakes blur to ash in our throats.

I almost froze to death,

at the first taste of cold liquor,

that burned the fresh cedar of my brother's eyes,

to carbon, nimble, in our aging palms.

Kiln

She outran her memories

beneath the sun's aging.

In her shadow she picked petals of stars,

placed them between the land's glitter.

Her brother, who was eager, eclipsed her,

turned to corn pollen in her lashes.

She no longer reaches for overlooks,

not even to fist thunder in the lightning of roses.

Glass-Stained Mountains

Fractured reds in bone marrow blues,

Marble mist twists into dust devils.

Black wet rocks, smear dusk to pinon tears.

The moon pale blushing

gnaws hexagons,

tongues spires and brittle brick,

in charcoal rain,

in pastel light.

Premier

A pale face, blooms from asphalt

glows with canyon peaches

cups ears of shadows

drowns its knuckles in wet mud

pours dusk on silhouettes

drapes dawn with lips of gold corn

and beams of bone dust.

Yawn

Sunrise, warm lips
sip from sandstone cliff
cedar, bold and sour,
embraced by branches teething
with stone and story.

When corn husks swing in each direction
centuries ripple at into tomorrow's sunset.

Guilt Trip

I shatter my fist to scrape

each thought to a simmer

to boil

over

my skull whistles

I cup each howling letter

and slick my hair to wind.

iiya

Mutton fat, like forest fire
consumes dry lips lake long.

The rim's mirage dances downward
frozen down to the yolk.

Broken pottery undresses
the flickering of dry forests.

Skeletons carry logs
through hot blue tongues.

Good Warriors

A belt of brothers

hear cooing, imagined sticky lambs opening

in each direction,

fresh coal in their palms.

The salt they swallow,

pressed in pink palms, peeling from their recent birth,

evaporate deep in the rock,

deep in the rock,

deep in the rush of salty desert heat.

You Come from Canyon

from a hospital in tuba city
cold abalone feels the same
no matter how clean the womb.

there you are
was my first name
a new blade
in my father's empty pocket.

you look just like him
I shared my tongue for the first time.
I tasted salt water before I saw ocean.

i just wish he told me the truth
In the canyon, the ocean hides elbow deep.
The sun evaporates the parts that glisten
and returns the rest through tears.

Ultrasound

A child carves rock in the shape of his mother's belly
and rides it clockwise toward earth.

From above, a visitor reads a eulogy
in iron casted stone:

BELOW THEY USE TO
TODAY THEY ATTEMPT
A ONCE WAS
A PERSON ONCE WAS
A PERSON
WAS NO LONGER.

From below, shade the shape of a hand, scurries
over white welts in itchy rock.

I Start the Year in Melting Cars

a deer mends with fender

knuckles burst eye sockets

blood drips when wheels bite backward

we never helped clean up the metal

only licked nickels

before we stained

Fire

Crickets

shiver

in moon's

silver brush.

They croquet

ashy wings

between

raindrops

and bark's

cold breath.

Sharpened

cheek-boned

breath grinds

corn kernel

vel vet dressed

ash tongues

cack kle

Petroglyph

There's danger

in 50-foot-tall cheekbones.

Dust melting blood

Kind of intimate.

Looking down, heat kicks up.

how high do I have to be for my bones to scatter?

Maybe then the sheep will giddy,

at the sight of filleted torso, collecting wind's lips

as they bless their knees with my eyelid's ashes.

Sweat Lodge

break your back
in shadows of
echoes and dancing
flame spitting embers

relax your body
in sheep's throat
and spill your words
in burning sand

I left love in the young trembling

worry only
of moon's
hot glow
cold stare

blow your eyes
open when
birds break
the new sun.

Barbed Wire Fathers

live serrated lives

like all good weapons do

after the cutting

of sky and tongue

they wander home

smell nickels in their noses

cough red dust devils

whisper their father's wounds

in the breathing flaw

of saw-toothed looms.

Stray

Stray cults stride emerald shimmers.

Tiptoe brown beaded sea,

peel rose petals beneath coal sky.

They wake as tangerine bones bloom

and leave and leave.

Desert Boy

You lightning your fists through tender rain

not knowing thunder echoes shadows loose.

With morning steam in the desert of limbs and mucused breath,

plateau your knees,

inhale shadows through your eyes,

drum your soles to pace

the calm of your cry.

I've never sweated mud

or rolled my body into monocline

choked prayers, whispered

out hissing stone

I never sleep,

only unfold charcoal

with charred hands

to pick at pebbles

hoping one can scrape moss

off my patina'd bones

til I laugh off canyon walls

and swallow smoke without tears

Love in Spare Time

If we're lucky enough
To gleam in both our parent's sunlight
the heat of their red faces,
fold inward at the sight of our wandering.

We only notice the crooked furniture,
dust the color of tight knuckles.
A second more, this mist would glow another story,
One where we've never seen two people more in love.

1868

A promise

filters the scarce sun.

Its desperate offering,

Only shines on the waist

Of civilized men,

whose lips of leather

devoured

the gunpowder of burning clouds.

Healing, Rock Deep
after Laura Tohe

This broken land, raw, mapped by rainbows
demands the price of woven silence.

From the east, a force of fury opens earth
wanting too much of green fragile patterns.

We accept simple faith – a man grows near
a road, his broken branches cross over sun beams.

May I be worthy? angry? malevolent?
gentle as the wet vastness of moonlight?

He comes dancing crooked from the south,
and surrenders the courage to remove his cast.

Glass Sight
for Arthur Sze

Under a rising moon, it's hard to swivel and break
the sight of children growing in bellies, even harder
to place their unfolding against silver rock. If poets travel
from one image to the next, what comes of the ribbons
of roads breathing between letters? There are ways out
of this sequencing broad shoulders flexing commas
young lungs. The crunching of leaves scrape the mind,
deer travel along the concrete. Their chance to exist,
the split second of impact when their broken antlers become the page.
The crack on the window unfolds to a map. This glass trail illuminates
like lightning a child cuts their finger open and blood
boils out, like snow melting at the canyon's mouth.

Scarecrow

Their uncle never taught them to raise a fire,
told them water, from glass bottles, burns the breath.

Waiting for his return, they huddle,
desperate for licks of flame.

Smoke followed those who were jealous,
they joked, or was it those who were angry,
either way, the land always knew who to choke.

Gagi

A crow,

A crow's cry,

A crow was crying

when one kid turned his head toward sky's last drop of light,

and saw a silhouette standing among the corn.

With his hands still reaching toward the fire,

he traced the shadow's shirt collar

and with his eyes, cut out the wet lips,

that had already begun to dry.

Ammo

I never met my nali. My dad coiled that story, into his ammo box. For years, it slept quietly in the closet of our different homes. It's body, cold, and hard, would sometimes catch on the tips of our shoes, a small echo in its growling belly. One day, when I had heard my father storm out the door, I lifted the metal anchors like gently pulling the t-shirt off a stranger, and inside were a handful of polaroids. The only two photos of my grandpa I know of show him smiling in the careful arms of my grandma, the years not yet placed in her cheekbones. The other photo is him, with the same smile, ready to climb into his cot, a restless bullet.

Hammerhead

A good dad

At first,

is a torch

yelling

until the gavel,

grows a handle.

There's plenty of chores to drink through

though in the magic hands of sober metal.

A hammer is a good excuse to excel decay

The shattering of cement is a discipline wealthy in silences.

When striking the fossils of boarding school chalkboards,

A hammer becomes compassionate of its own sizzling tongue.

Shepherds

Two boys soak their brown limbs in red canyon water.

Their laughs echo inside the eyes of mummy cave.

The sun, with its head resting on the other side of the wall
offers the cool shade of its quivering hairs,
folded neatly over horizon.

Hooves, dance on rivers surface, their shoulders, the surface
Announce their departure,

Announce their arrival,
this single echo,
turns their heads, opens their mouths,
toward red canyon
dawn mist rising over white wool.

Broken Nights

When you're bored of the dirt,
and hot rocks blushing
there's only
so much silence
to bathe in.

Curiosity
comes thirsty and vengeful
to the right smile
on a cool summer night
when all but children sleep
ready to bloom
broken at the canyon's mouth.

Lightning on eager hands strike in porch light hours.

With no visible blueprint to offer,

Roots, innocent at the touch

bear patterns of breath and motion.

A moment the clouds witness,

as their ashen arms cover their blooming eyes.

we don't want to remember walls caving in.

don't

want

to crave

its guts

red pulp,

dandelions in the spring.

around the corner another massacre.

The canyon saw us planting corn in its navel once.

and decided that was more than enough.

Our stomachs echo now,

the last vibration,

a distancing goodbye.

Father's Poetry

Day 1

There's mercy for skilled workers.
Even if they use tools that cut

dead trees, alive trees, no trees at all
as new walls are skin thin,

not stacked like cousins wrestling
for a chance to feed a hungry fire.

Day 2

Some disappear for days,
Returning in the night from a fight
they lost,
 or whisper quiet enough for themselves to hear *I won.*

During their absence:
 the floors were spotless
 the dough would rise, given enough time

 the door unlocked
 and loose
 ready to give
 at the first sign of
 another restless breeze.

Day 3

In 1867,
Barbed wire named itself
to keep in and out.

A year later,

The fence was fortified
by limb and lung,
drunk and heavy,

brown fists cling the metal tight rope.

A House Shall Be Provided

Short limbs coil open
a magpie flirts on a windowsill,
teasing with the wind,
its feathers ruffle
mirage like,
free to flee
at the gunshot
this house is obligated to,
triggered by a secondhand storyteller.

Overlooks

two flying
corpses

wrapped in flour bags

catch their silhouettes on a reaching ledge,

ants on ear lobe

tunnel through the eyes

heading neck first into white house

two bodies -- a junction a lake a fort two walking days away

a small town. where laws are named

people couldn't keep themselves up

two restless children

shouting with their fists.

Rug Birth

I

Dust

born by friction,

millions from grinding stone,

pollen heavy,

then all at once,

lambhead light.

II

We leave home for the first time

and strangle ourselves at the door.

III

My mother dyes my eyelids
Hogan red.

Our first lesson in loss
is bone marrow,
the color of our thirst
where water burns alive.