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I, Joshua R. Butts, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

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New to the Lost Coast

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New to the Lost Coast

A dissertation submitted to the
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by

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Abstract

*New To The Lost Coast* is a book-length collection of poems that engages the themes of loss and exile. Popular music and the movies play prominent roles in the exploration of these themes. The subsequent critical essay investigates Robert Hass’s work as a poet of the environment.
Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank editors of various magazines where these poems first appeared, sometimes in different forms. “Class of ’96” first appeared in *The Hat*, “Rodeo Ramble” in *Quarterly West*, and “Poem Beginning with a Line from Walter Benjamin, Ending with a Line from Ronald Reagan” in *Forklift, OH*. “Cove Road,” “Union Hill Road,” and “Chenoweth Fork Road” are forthcoming in *Word For/Word*, as is “Alaskan Abecadary” in *Sonora Review*.

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The climate becomes less extreme, the earth grows green and pleasant, human beings and animals are not so fierce. Finally, you come to people living in towns and cities, who are constantly engaged in trade, both by land and by sea, not only with one another or with their immediate neighbors, but even with quite distant countries.

—Thomas More
One.
Blackout

A bicycle
with a raw gear

ticks by in the night.
Sirens like large flying birds

mutter to a measure
odd but regular.

The cream spoils.
Berries hope at least

for a compote.
A collision

tickles from a bumper
a spark so bright.

Fridge on mute—
an emptiness that spooks
and charms.

Chainsaws.

A bicycle with a raw

gear passes.

Even Henry James wouldn’t know

what to do with this

patience and stillness

and boredom.

Write a beautiful line in the middle of the night:

Blackout.
A Long Nap

_The Goodbye Girl_ (1977)

The way a piece of shell skates away in the egg
like you can never shoot that gun in the dream
I pick out the notes of some long forgotten TV theme.
Yes, feels like a Sunday and yes,
_The Goodbye Girl_ is on again.
Something to sleep to, to take like some casual vitamin.
I noticed I was about to be born into a theory
that would mean I was happy. It was to be
my birthday and then I snap to a room full
of art books, those nudes and racecars
in the basement of the student museum.
Using my one free ticket on a central Ohio morning
looking at art books, and then thinking: sandwich
I go to church to celebrate the red five coming up
and I’m able to order the lunch meat.
All room for new when a young hullabaloo.
But what is offered is clearly Richard Dreyfuss
and those brunettes, one ten, the other, thirty-three.
And then I find out Sandy Denny died the day
before I was born. Should have been more worried
about falling down those stairs. Took it like a man.
After Dinner

There’s change on the floor, but that’s rude for a tip.

Quarters spend well in machines—elsewhere, a nuisance.

It’s just that way. We can’t return. Paste a comic book to the wall and try to step inside. Go ahead, try to step inside. You might make it to the color blue but the orange resists—your spirit pooling like water between tarps—like that decade on the cover of the *NOW Generation*,

the hymnal for the hippies, monochromatic and banged.

Pennies are worthless. There’s a commission that says so.

Ban the penny. The nickel too. Who can even spell nickel without the automatic nun? Dimes are light and forever cute. Quarters will do (in a pinch, even, yes, for a tip).

But pennies: piles of worthless unless pre-’82.

Hey penny, this penny is worth more than you.

My cousin, Clint, worked at a mill that cut up and melted the cents for their worth in CU.

The Mint inquired, ceasing the molten of those tokens.

A penny, a farewell, a relic—not even good enough to go and see Jack Benny, to go and see Jack Benny.
Snow

This street will be nice if it snows this winter.
It will pile on its already pile
and we can be quiet and not worry.
If lucky the gas will funnel
from the free zone. We can be
a big cake & ice cream.
If it snows this winter
we will stand on the sand pile
and watch it get snowy.
The temperature will drop
and we will thaw our childhoods.
Line by line we will cafeteria
and hotrod into adulthood.
There will be parade-goers
who for days have left folding chairs.
And it will snow. And it will snow.
If it snows we will get to know
the neighbors: who shovels
and who tramples and who falls
and who doesn’t go anywhere
(no tracks). The Marathon station
will close (no drivers). The weeds
will freeze and be even uglier.

The street will be nice if it snows this winter, the camels at the highway church even more out of place: American camels, moons and moons have passed to make you. If it snows this winter we will unpack the fridge, pull our butter from an igloo. Lover, if it snows this winter we will huddle and sing songs for our friends in the jungle.
Poem of the Teenager

Are there strings on the canary and black? If so,

it’s hush on the defense. Bruises await the cold tub,

though they are hardly bruises yet. Having come up

with the ball, and having broken the plane we go

to the cold millimeters: an old director cutting to the jaw line

of some brute ingénue as she crosses tomboy into straight cut

above the knee organza. Still some part of herself

but better, improved, realized. Many films are made on this rule,

plastic high school welcoming puberty by the hand

and welcoming all but those Jan & Dean deadly curves.
Class of ’96

Travis is a housepainter.

Stanley works at the hardware.

William works there with him.

On Wednesday they unload nails.

Elkington moved to New York to act and write and direct.

Clifford misses Elkington.

Elkington misses Clifford.

Benson is a mechanic.

Allen is a mechanic.

J.J. is a mechanic.

They all love carburetors.

James White is selling Bibles.

Hope works at a nursery.

Patrick is in the Marines.

Melody married Henry.

Henry is recalcitrant.

Christopher now tugs a barge.

He used to sell crystal meth.

Merle and Ken do lawn care.

Jennifer is a lawyer.

Victoria takes X-rays.
Jerome plays the piano.

Eddie, Mark, Levon, and George sell home-owners’ insurance.

Mark also sells Life and Flood on the side—George, only Life.

Ann is involved in 4-H.

Cleveland works in a foundry.

Jill, an archeologist, still finds time to play the drums.

Yoshi moved back to Japan.

He lives in a small tin can.

Eloise is a teacher.

Mary Lou is a teacher.

Katharine, Cynthia, Kate, Brandy, Jenny, Dot, and Jan are all substitute teachers.

Jason and B.J. coach ball and cover P.E. duties.

Zachary sells mobile homes.

Oliver engraves tombstones.

Somewhere out in Idaho Mike and Brett are both preachers.

Dominique is a dancer.
Hube sells shoes at Less is More.
Holly, Margie, Maggie, June,
Cassie, Molly, Hannah, Clare
and Judy are all housewives.
Grace adopted a baby
from a Russian agency.
Skip is a missionary.
He spent six years in Haiti.
Lucy and Lucy sell wine.
Toria did time for theft.
Lewis, Manny, and of course
Alex have all passed away.
Mario is a draftsman.
Antonia is a chef.
Evan sells stationery.
Herb and Albert drive box trucks.
Todd, an apprentice plumber,
back from New Orleans last year,
gave up on his dream of jazz.
Marty paints homes for Travis.
MUSCLECARS

after Breaking Away, 1979

He’s spent too much time
half-drunk on the afternoon,

driving through the lovely & wide campus,
hoping an idea will knock him back
to when he did not fall at every glance,
every warm red breath of spring.

Like iodine from cotton
on a patient’s arm,
glass bottles blot the fence line.
Paint chips litter the hallway.

Bloomington, this feeling doesn’t move
the way former hope pours
from the toes, only he can’t
remember the way he ever was.
His girlfriend moved to Wauwatosa.

Her peanut brittle was amazing.
There’s a Wide Old Prison Looming

The stars are out & the rough is no challenge.
I find my ball down near the pines
& hit a hook around one of the tallest.
The devil helps me make the putt.
He’s not short, nor red—a caddy.
Aim an inch to the right. I do. I make it.
The air smells like summer. I bogey the next hole
& decide I’ve played plenty.
On the way to town I see an old man who has hit a turkey.
He is startled & the turkey is gone.
He is on his way to the course. I promise
to follow him the rest of the way & to play nine.
On number three I hit a hook around one of the tallest pines
but I miss the putt. The devil is with the foursome
in front of us. They don’t let us play through.
Golden Ties

From the inherited collection of twenty golden ties,
the President-elect is sure he’ll wear one out
once.

He watches the flutter of golden ties
kept keyed in a closet. They whir
on a railed armature and shimmer

when there’s light; when there’s light
the strangest of secrets are revealed to the newly-elected.

An old home, drafty, not all doors fit their jambs,
escutcheons not all perfectly screwed.
The White House looks clean.

But never a word about the golden ties—
notes on chef, china, executive sealed vinyl—Hunky Dory,
Blood on the Tracks—bulky, sent to the basement.

Mr. President, one night soaking
may you ask aloud,
When would be the time to wear one of those ties?
The Green Breast

Looking at the receipt I decide franchise
is surely a better word than product.
It’s the late days & every summer annoyance
cloys—suddenly too early to mow.
I hate the season & the laughter I catch,
the brood mare out with her brood.

Unemployed & nothing but to brood
I even think FRANCHISE,
unemployment, some catch
way without making myself a product,
or selling some bucket. I’d mow
but my shins know the annoyance

a stranger’s grass harbors—annoying
ticks & jiggers, no-see-ums, a brood
that latches you while you mow:
cutting, well, a franchise
of grasses, & some only controlled by products.
Safe at home, sort of. There must be a catch.

From her porch the neighbor asks, What’s the catch?
There have been glances (do I annoy)?
I say, I treat my lawn with products
of the celestial variety & still this brood
threatens my equity, my franchise.
Well, why not mow & mow

until the grass is bare to the ground & then mow
the dirt until every last patch
dies & then re-stitch a single seed until every strand grows like a franchise?
I’ve found being lowly seldom annoys.
Come by air my brood
personal comforts are purely a borrowed product.

Let’s get a starlet to sell sod as a product:
strong wheat, embroidered, set to mow & mow.
No need to sack garage walls with XXX, a brood
of retrained well-meaning boll weevils ready to catch
an eye-full of annoyance,
worms in the dirt-filled hull. The boll weevil’s a franchise.

The blues are a product of no brood.
No calculated annoyance, no franchise
but a person caught for mowing, etc.
These States

Money for the train and no promise
of the landscape reversing—
the land-to-land rug-fest, Berber to barber, indoor, outdoor,
station to station, some ever-present forced farewell—hello
crazy, hello ugly, hello lovely, hello dire—how are the folks?
Mine were blue and then forgot me.
Mine waved. Mine prayed. Mine begged for one more song.
If I were headed to the highway, which would it be—
the one in the distance, the one here?
Could I get a real answer if I walked a mile?
I’ve sent letters, saying I’d be through
announcing from a rotating speaker
the theme of my life—this, by God, I’m here for,
but I keep going like runners. No letters from home.
Hollyhocks and flowers await the word to mourn.
The cessation any travel threatens
amounts to popular song.
If mandolins and trombones collected
I’d request Sloop John B. Every building waits.
You’ve seen one privy—
but the hours in a rented room glow more
than the sun-lit kitchen at brunch.

If you are going to church,
good luck. If you are going to a hotel,
you have my blessing and money for the bath.

What part of voyage is like collecting the offering?

Roof slats take on the rainwater. Ticket takers, faces.

Land is a straight line. Travel is like a pill.


There were fifteen here that I didn’t know.

Mine saved up coupons to get one of those.

Mine yodeled and then dove into the Great Lake.
Alaskan Abecedary

America in the middle of autumn & the amateurs are fallen.

Begin & tell me what things are effusive enough.

Call out to the excuse for Alaska.

Devil the youth along the path of school & into country living & grow only adults.

* Executors
falling from one
floor to another

in a darkened elevator.

Forty cabins
gone for good

like a compulsive loser’s loser at checkers,
loans starving already garnered food-packing wages.

* 

Hope is the drag.
Hope is a drag.
Hope heals.
Hope like a harpoon
hurts.

* 

Iditarod.
Just a few truculent
jonquils to cheer
any summer knit wit
caught in his undies
behind a stable

kept tidy
by some
Katarina,
lovely one
come from the hills
to suffer fools,
lost among a strain of longing
for a landscape to break a lull between
Roman columns & cigars.

*M*

Musher’s life is on the trail—

so my cabin don’t worry

can be small—though never

without feeding & mushing

& feeding & mushing—every

barking day a cycle.

*M*

Out there the sound of car trouble—
could be a mother

or some fool trying to find another way
to drive.

*  

Plowers on break from constant plow
bag ptarmigan for dinner & fun:

“Quit! Could you quit?”
asks James when Elvis has killed more than five.

*  

Recalling the first winters
Katarina knew she would miss the red
shake of morning on the Alaskan ice.

South, pilots in small skiffs
net a few salmon
& so find forgetfulness

but Tom
tossed from his last Alaskan apartment
receives a telegram from a friend:

*Tom, get here. Catch the rail.*

Under the Great Plains

grows an unctuous earth,

& for much

of it, an

underground

sea.

Vast reaching is a rosy

phrase. Track

by track is torture, a vast torture.

*What Tom wants is to win the match
where he lives once more,
crossing corner to corner

from X into Y, whole grain & lonesome,
fed or unfed—
knowing with a kiss

to tarry less,
exclaim little
& travel lean.

* 

The York Peppermint Patty
thinks it’s cool.

Yes.

* 

The zoologist
has no knowledge
of the loneliness of the polar bear,
& penguin
& otter
& seal.
WPA Poet

Though sound can take its time
what brand of re-interest could they have
for work I’m doing now?
Sixteen calendars exhausted and no devotees.
I lost my own small part of America
being content thinking color!
some kind of refraction, some
jeweled vision of the self painting the self—
but that was three thousand checkers ago.
Now: a collection of gestures. See me,
I’m caught complaining. See me,
I’m caught drunk. See me, I’m caught
in the library without intention to use the library.
The past is the only way to make sense of now.
If that was the feeling, it might help. It might.
When the Acadians flew to New Orleans,
the refugees from Belarus
—well, I study cultures of flight
and I have work to do. Something for
my brand of man, a WPA poet: Will Piddle Around—
will make great works for great ages:
cattle ceaselessly fenced, horns facing the wall;
bridges for the smaller streams, golden men
and golden shovels trapped in a filibuster.
Art big and public; art for no one at all.
Harmonica

Take that lion in your mouth,

paths that draw to parade and to morning,

morning caught

as if in some interview.


Why return? It’s really nice here.

The buildings feel the same way—

jubilant, random, a little like a cattail.

Rooms & rooms are having parties

but only that kind of party—one stacked on the other,

they are doing this and we are doing this—

and between concrete floors all the dancing and lying

ends with a single ring and a single buzz.

Wake up late and play it again. You may get it.
You can sell a harp, but not resell.

Keep telling stories, and when you draw

cut it short and resist thinking it’s nice only here.

In many places there’s still plenty of wood.
Coal-Dock Road

I can’t mourn your far-off avenues
when you’ve left me. Catching the Pennsylvania to Chicago

I knew you were up to more than a smokehouse.
If only I’d captured your coffee syrup voice in some small can

then all this trash bag light wouldn’t so upset.
The buckets near the coalhouse haven’t moved

& winter is coming & so if you favor poker, Honey,
there’s a basket of cards on our bed and heaven is greedy, so hurry.

If my feeling seems forest-bound, let me untether.
Our bedroom is high, a-level with the poplars.

There’s a wind that blows outside the window &
the stones in the creek are close enough for any fool

who needs to find a weapon. His motives could be scary.
Here I am your functioning voluptuary
& I hear the hibiscus taking his dream down,

tiny red filters dropping to heighten the feeling of doubt.

Get here as quick as the car goes.
Chenoweth Fork Road

Take me down Chenoweth across Sunfish creek
& we could pan for gold, we could take off
our shoes and place our feet in the cold, cold.
We could help him cut that big field of grass
or give the dough-faced child over there someone
to catch the ball and someone to throw it back.
Take me down Chenoweth & we’ll hope the water
hasn’t risen over the road & we can make it
to the covered dish. Take me down Chenoweth
& eventually we’ll get to Poplar Grove
& then end up at Smoky Corners, Grooms, Arkoe,
or back over near Bacon Flat or Pine Gap,
or over to Duke, Hatch, Lad or Latham.
(Of course we’d cross The Ap. a few times
and wouldn’t really be lost.) Or we could just
chase our way to Sinking Spring, trying to find
the water. We could go down Chenoweth
to the Pine Bank Boer Goat Farm
& check out the spotted breeding program.
They start kidding soon, a few does for sale.
Take me down to the Pine Bank Boer Goat Farm
& we’ll check out sires and dams: does and bucks by
War Chief & Cruel Girl, Rhubarb & Ruby Begonia,
Egg Ryals Magnum & Sasquatch, Shanghai Red & Pine Bank
Thelma, Algonquin & Buckler’s Romie,
Mason Dixon & Pine Bank Paint Spot, Bosque
Valley Sharif Demetrius & Wiltshire Farm’s
Bubbles. Take me down Chenoweth, we’ll
run along the whole way, singing songs,
reciting poems—troubadours. We’ll saunter up to the meal
held in a garage—miles of casserole & grace
before we eat. Take me down Chenoweth—
we’ll look for a church and a graveyard;
we could have our picnic.
You bring the wine. I’ll bring the deviled eggs.
Surely we can find a tree to camp under.
Take me down Chenoweth—maybe we can locate
some high stakes bingo or a carryout
with video poker. Take me down Chenoweth—
this guy I know out there deals in feathers.
He’s got whole birds, three for a dollar.
Hackleshin Road

Smoky corners, pines.
Searching for jobs in Latham
the first thing is soldier.

No plan for no Pepsi it seemed
I’d remain pure Hackleshin
& that was months, then

like a bluesman to the old changes
I took my tuning fork to Georgia, & on.
No potato chip had ever experienced fear in Latham.

The worst I had done was cut my hand on a tire.
The white oak of course had something to say.
The Kentucky love affair (long-separated) gave a kiss at the gate.

*

Meretricious and handled by the storm
the land never felt my resistance—
no buzz to its spark. Devilish, perhaps.
Out to make no bartering table of my life
I made a note of the coordinate:
A land without sentimentality

on the way to a land without sentimentality.
Hackleshin seemed a shabby distance.
There was no movie ambition, or dalliance.

I was a soldier,
if stumbled to, an aspiration undefined
but there were no trees—no trees—

* 

& I never once thought of Hackleshin
until there was some whinesome
sound of I swear a flute—& just that sound

made me think of the note
I’d kept in my jacket pocket that read:
Hackleshin always said,
losing a single toe in a big war
silences any crowd.
Just then a red wind bit the village
staying for three days
though we drove out through the storm
to shoot bullets into the Garden of Eden.
Burnt Cabin Road

You wonder—

What happened there?
Measley Ridge Road

They keep waiting on the red pig
to make them all that money.

If one finds a novelty,
then Shirley Hughes something is on.

Send your laundry water
to the nearest stream.

Ziplocs huddle the deaths
of the holiest white poor

with their ragged white meat, dry bushels
requiring so many creamed sides.

If this were Louisiana
one might know how to make love.

Moving with the weather is no option
for those on Measley Ridge,
no vessels prepped for when the Brazos sweeten.

There was supposed to be a reunion.

The message moves through the family
telling the outskirts not to show

and the forgotten played-out orphans
pushing the long boats out into the lake

they can get lazy in their tans.

There’s no reason to travel to Measley.
Wakefield Mound Road

Is this Drunkard’s Path—

the signal block instructing runaways

to zig & zag

in the brown & gray autumn light?

Can’t find a mound

on Wakefield.

Can’t find a mound

anywhere today,

but there is this bridge

buttressed by two layers

of bridge time:

1930’s pony truss

retrofitted

in the oddest of ways,

with girders from a through plate.

At creek level: a train
camped on a bridge,

some red rectangle

humping

a turquoise spider. From above:

two metal big ideas.
Red Hollow Road

Cars parked forever
under the crab apple.

Why’d they all show?
There’s a stage

in the back-hoed
shooting range,

the scalloped land
& the dreadnoughts

strung to the peculiar
note of the afternoon.

Some have fires.
Some have brittle fingers.

A man has a horse called Banjo.
Bring a covered dish.
Hello, Goodtime.
Welcome out.

*

With lights like light for the biggest
coon hunt,

Jim White’s Pinto chases
a fox to the end of the bridge—

but these are foxes
that sally near trash cans,

no arctic foxes
on Red Hollow

except for trips to Beaver
for a euphemism.

The wild out here
are to be trusted.

Far out here
isn’t that far out.

*  

The grass is sprinkled  
with flowers of blue, purple, yellow & pink. 

The deputy for beauty in the county  
will be rewarded  

& though he tries too hard  
may his yawning reward  

warmth in the morning,  
coolness in the afternoon.  

His jeep—bright orange  
blasting Foreigner  

from forest to water—  
kernels, seems ready to sprout.  

*
I’ve brought the most insulting side dish.

*

Deer season done,
Christmastime,
rural yards become cities,
roads turn safe.
Throughout the night.
tears adjust themselves.
The lights get turned on.
The tailor needs an extra button.
The actors disassemble.
The commandments are simple.

*
When the pauses between arrows
reach twelve minutes
elloquent young men from the town
play a stretch of country music.

Then more arrows, & after three callers
trim the turkey boxes—
the cancellations begin.
Too many roads, too much wallpaper to hang.

The car bivouac, the preferred concert
& the bellies ache all night.

* 

Remember me when I become a soda.

* 

In the morning the war is over.
We cram our homes into cars

& follow the customary gestures of daylight.

One highway sign seems to read:

*Come lovers to the cone zone,*

*we’ve got a chill*

& so many children show up

the cinema offers free matinees

& the silver vat baked beans are traps

of wiles and wiles and wiles.

Help me with the humming conscience

I’m scared to go on.
Cove Road

Cuddly in your sound branches make you over,
clayed ditches salamander,

but this isn’t a ghazal or trash party or pill-headed crisis.
Those that know you are treacherous on their own

in the deepest, most natural woods.
Pick a driveway & the dead get up and go home.

There was a puddle near the back of this property
where no fire would be lit until the pine settled

& once the fire was lit they’d talk of
the carbureted land & something about a lake,

a cove, beautiful, big-cheeked face,
moors where the letters spell out A-M-E-R-I-C-A

like an advertisement for that failed band, one
issued for Detroit, advertising this one can sing!
& all along it should’ve been about Cove Road,
the lonely brilliance on the terrain—

Cove Road, the way we avoid and attract him, her—
and then it’s all over.
Tater Ridge Road

The orange between two rooms.
Every Wednesday & Sunday we church.

You could call it Bible study—
among the rescued we recognize the wrong done,
as Jesus would’ve. We don’t build boats
but deal in golden and gracious praise.

If there is song, we check the beat
but we allow song, any song, eventually any beat.

For some our rules are too rough.
For some our rules are not enough.

If there are spirits we drink them.
If there are not, we rattle drums & wait on the spirits.

There may be hours & hours of footage proving otherwise,
but we know which tree to hang our clothes on for the super-dry.
Gravel Washer Road

You ever had a nightmare, Johnny?
some barn all stuffed with Charolais
& the asphalt cracks a chasm before every driveway

so the stranded country families are encased
& subject to the broadcast—
beavercreeked, starved, not seeing lovers.

But these may be the good days on Gravel Washer
when the six-year-olds
are forced to the question of washer

& gravel, though road is far off, resplendent—
another country may as be.
The rabbits mock the shooting sets.

Fall near, I wrecked there once
on a charcuterie delivery
but hitched to a sheep cavalcade

& was carried to the delivery,
but had trouble finding back to home as some white jet was haunting.
Union Hill Road

Expanse: room here,
ever so high,
near the low Serpent hill.

Interior: brother string lines,
      quilt, sock,
      quilt, sock, nightmare.

Expanse: arbor beltway,
ear pressure, wire weed train,
oak, smoke, oak.

Interior: television,
cable box,
dust on wooden spoons.

Expanse: tire pressure, hum and wind,
a steeple here somewhere,
a cellular vacuum.

Interior: chilly, pepper jelly,
couch, hutch, broom,
painting tiers.

Expanse: arbor beltway,
all creatures
fresh and nostalgic.

Interior: city, city, city
city, city,
city, city, city, city.

Expanse: top of the hill line,
shades lighten
with distance and rain.

(Interior: collapsed,
restored to wind,
pre-nostalgic.)

Expanse, Expanse, Expanse.
Tennyson Road

Nearly as beguiling as that town called “Academia”

Tennyson forces brother to turn the Volvo around

for a photo. The pose is forgotten in the can

as the tender valley copse

to be cased by explorers calls us passersby.

We drive over the low rise, looking for the blue shack.

Never be late for a stranger’s care, Momma always said.

Don’t do ‘em like Chaney did.

The guide hikes us up the electric power line ski-slope,

saying for the length of the tour

these lines stretch to feed cities that are not here.

I suddenly remember the taste of sweet potatoes & quail

& make up a lie for myself about a market.

I would have to peel the sweet potatoes

& stuff the quail with thyme and maybe figs.

The grassy, weeded path keeps going up.

My brother doesn’t hear the crackle

but thinks the wildflowers are new and blazing.
Shyville Road

Woods cede to farmland
& the State University extends

operations to include aquaculture
(& among so many farms).

e-mail is oyster something
& letters addressed Dear State Fair Dog Agility Participant

find their way through the mail to the
mint highway signs that announce

a silver spinning budding aquaculture—
spawning pools, tadpoles, cruel young life

a rifle’s bullet from American Centrifuge.
American Centrifuge? Mint sign.

Take a right at Wakefield Mound, then a left
at Nursing Home, or just take Shyville.
You can huddle spawning pools right up to it?

Well, man makes the biggest machines

for the biggest causes that of course
call for the biggest solutions.

Could there be a county-sized, steam-filled iron
& some wealth of fabric

to stitch and press the perfect poor person’s uniform
for hiring day? Any need filled.

What was this wiped-out town called?
Shyville.

My wife’s forebears had a habit of naming communities after themselves.

Here’s a print.

Lester Shy on his horse, Custer, captured by a Brownie No. 2.

Photography 1910, not hot to trot, but stationary boy!

The swish of the tail is fuzzy, the only imperfection.

Spoiled by our slicing shutter speed,

no more hallucinatory ground up cigars.

A pile could smoke you a mile to some bandied about bridge where to cross you take a stand on local politics.

But what if you don’t know the area?

Assess, quickly, or guess.
Let the 18-wheelers ride with the Amish.
Then mutter Shyville, Martin Marietta, A-Plant, aquaculture

with trace quantities of transuranics
like descendants who collect custom glass.

Custom glass sometimes pulls folks apart,
two brothers waiting for a relative to die.

There are trees & surely one cloud
& a few people who remember Shyville.

Yes. There was Lester’s sister.
Her true Penelope was Beaver Creek.
Black Hollow Road

It’s quite bright on Black Hollow,

not the sharp pale mornings,

the impetuous glow under trees.

Fogs are known to camp here;

fogs are not here.

A bright morning light, some plagiarized noon—

the county cadre confused by changing mail routes,

the afternoon too early in the day.

Is there a Coffee Hollow envy?

Smokey Hollow envy? You’d never know

for there’s always a cadenza,

even in the barely pale eve.
Zahn’s Corner Road

Light hits ice under the fence
& there is apple in the whisky.
Roll above houses tucked below
the road line—below trees & tire hum.
In cities there’s usually at every window
a whir of freeway—in spite of walls,
concrete checkers, ornate sand set to crumble.

Zahn’s Corner has crazy concrete
—try to riddle it together—
watch the hairpin, don’t be distracted by
the eroded & ribbed with rebar
castaway gravel home to an early 80’s Pepsi can,
weeds, weeds, & a rail bridge’s
gray stretch where you learn Wally ♥ Jan.

Drinking shots in the winter dawn
and through the winter morning
the hermit notices aspirin
have an actual taste.
A clothes hanger catches the noon news
from Cincinnati. Due to tragedy,
a young woman argues
you will hear of every city—
in this case it’s Peebles. Flattop
on the sexton, gesturing: steer the cars this way.

_We’ll do this as respectful as we can_—
a niece wants a ring off a dead lady’s hand.
She has a right.

A store nearby presents a stability—
like ashing cigarettes in a bowl
& then tomorrow to wash the bowl & eat oats.
Many things give pleasure, stimulate
the teeth, the gums, & tongue—
betel nut, cocaine, Anbesol—
you can get at least one of these on those wooden floors.
The Zahn’s Corner Market:
creosote, milk & lotto.
Tranquility Pike

A flash across the windshield
at really late day or in the morning

could make a wreck. So if you drive here, try to be
as patient as a cat waiting for a door.

You know you are helpless. Last winter I was stranded,
lived on tomatoes cooked quick with salt.

(We are pure blood around here.)
The kettle whirred for coffee, until I ran out.

Snow for three weeks.
Pure snow can dazzle.

Sober as a bell at midnight.
Is that a phrase?

I’m not lonely. Heat & rain breed many weeds.
Since he’s been gone—captured in fact—
my talk show host has grown a beard.
The band plays a familiar waltz

& then it’s morning
& the heat swallows the valley & then

like a camphor rises from the road
& so I wait on this rain

& then it pours & pours. It hits
in my head. I tell myself: this isn’t the kind of rain

that answers questions.
Could I take my wrong moments,

set them to some old tune?

If you need flannels

I have hundreds,

& if you have friends—

even people you meet under streetlamps—
tell them to get these shirts off my hands.
Three.
Movie Afternoon

If you could purchase a pony
with a whine so quiet
it rarely defined the silence it deafened
& kept it camped in a stable
off set—what a feat!—
and yet the lunch on set
would be the same
small boxes waiting
to release a fried vapor.

Among the sticky fingers
a salesman tries to introduce—The Napkin.
The actors with a paper wipe
become colonial, though this is not a way-back-there
picture. 20’s. The blue mountains
ferret the yellow sky.
Imperceptible back story
tempts gin hand to hand
under the checkered table cloth.
Could you pass the biscuits?
A competent moon hangs above
the lunch carts & sodas.
The Cecil B. come lately wonders,
Does this match the action?
There was always to be a girl in yellow
jumping rope & that bit
of fishing—but the land
wasn’t to fall onto itself
& into the water.
Rodeo Ramble

The Misfits (1961)

Mustanging, you misfit!
You’ve broken your arm, your clavicle.
You sold your heart at the bottom
of a square bottle.

I have an onion, you have a pain.
Your bruised back is puffed
pastel orange egg crate.
The phone booth is empty.

Your cord is cut, tubular
flap through a dark heaven.
Heath. Whisky snore.
A bend around the mime barrel.

The heart reports joy.
He gets skiffle about his ritual.
He tugs his loops, clicks his jaw.
He has a lot of grit, a lot of try.

Oscilloscope charts the wave
of the rippled beast’s back.

A beggar can wrestle sixty head,
can make a stock of the mane,

can sell the bones to giants

if the rope ripples silver.

Street sausage. Oil. A drink
to near death. Mustanging!

The airplane man wants to try.

Blond breasts, starched collars.

You misfit! I want off.

I want back on.
Cable Change in Comanche County

Cancellations in the dark
where the westerns flick.
Maybe next week says the scheduler,
too much brown dirt to avoid
and sometimes there’s water
emotionally tickled by flutes—
mossy water on a sound stage
wets the land, snuggles hooves.
I always figured this place would have
just this type of night:
white snow, Indian slander:
ire to the back of the neck
from pheasant tricks. A team
meets near the butte. A blue-black horse
wanders through the tall, green river grass.
Travel as this, much of it
is take me to your boot shop,
more time near the candle,
says the map. The story goes on.
A congregation gathers
as a donkey-led cart is reeled through.
Hitch

*I was transferring it from the film into their minds. So towards the end I had no violence at all.*

*But the audience by this time was screaming in agony, thank goodness.*

—Alfred Hitchcock, 1964

Since the movies have set the traps,

how many evenings looking out the windows?


Valencia, a good enough place for a tragedy.

The channel tuned to seven

the minute the curse comes

& the target is replaced

from window to screen &

the only thing left is the deletion.

Snap to the grave plot. Snap to the

pregnancy—oh brittle spring—everyday awaiting

the slackening of suspense,

that Jimmie Stewart has news of your wife.
Bowling Green!

_The Defiant Ones, 1958_

River water, lucky
not to hit the rocks—
go back, sir.

Get out the dogs
and the sudden re-bop radio
in the travel-ready leather

pouch—
proto, miraculous Walkman.

Ever hear a crying
dog yelping?

Owl, owls, & dead owls:
‘cause the decade is old.

Cons, toads & coded
fawns—
all languages say “thanks.”

Owls, owls, & dead owls.
The movie is old, dead owl.
All that machinery—

some backhoe, some Jeep
to lean on—this allegory chases one
down.

Bugs have the manners—
they run
when you mute the room.

Goals of those in flight: Get away.
Farm.
Buy a city.

We are bayonets
& still the night
can scare us.

Catch a water pail
& catch some of that
water,
swim, tie a string
that will snap.
There’s always a village,
a turpentine camp—
Is that Duane Eddy?
There’s always a kid,
the old man off—a convict appears
and always the tearing up.
A rag on the forehead—

healing after all is
healing—that it is started,
it is done.

Soft-focus stranded lady
born twenty miles
& don’t know a thing.

There’s always a car
that won’t start
and then it starts.
Pick up quick
for Canada—
looking for out Mounties!

They don’t always get caught,
usually shot.

_Bowling Green!—_

_sewing machine._

Desperate, joyful,
not good.
Civil War

Summoned from a scramble at Fairgreens,
porkpie atop his gracious fro—
Sal, a county commissioner, calls
an emergency session.
“I don’t care if you change
your name to Elvis Presley—
why cast your identity
to such an abstraction,
such a painful era?”
asked Elmore Pooty, a young seed farmer
looking to make a mayoral bid.
Marge Stevenson, the secretary
who calls Sal as soon
as the succinct, on-the-dots young man
hands her the form
thought of his children,
“if he ever has any.”

Sal’s afternoon is tough.
He doesn’t know if he’s legal
as Charles and Donny
are out in the next county
comping hydroelectric.
A man with this sort of question:
“Jesus, it seems so pastoral, almost personal.”
Sal’s mother had lived a tale
of brother against brother.
First she dated Leroy, and then his brother, Clark.
She had the boy with Leroy.
He was a furry little boy, a coat like a seal.

The young man says he’s changing
his name to Civil War
so he can hold something to sap
the sap—his being named would heal.
His breath could be
The Battle of Hastings,
the snow on the carport
The Flu of 1918.

The Capulets on the outskirts
make a phone call.

The crier gets the news by sundown.
Sal honors the name, but says that Civil War will have to answer to a higher power since he is too small for such things.
Cavalry Blue

Spin your stitch
Chinese print
prop of a town

embroidered
in the championing
dawn.

Only a span
of dresses,
abundant cattle and men—
a handsome profile
until the cavalry blue
cooped

then canyoned
trundle down the slats
and bivouac

on the outer frays.
Poem Beginning with a Line From Walter Benjamin
Ending with a Line from Ronald Reagan

Floating along the broad stream of perception
like one of the frames the editor
was so worried over—a woman drops a gun
from her body. It goes off in a patch of lilies.
No, she is in jail and the pistol falls
because she wears a skirt,
or they have dressed her in the orange baggy pants.
She smuggles the gun into the holding cell.
Her cell mates see her squirm behind
the partition. She wraps it in toilet paper,
wedges it behind the holder and snap!

Or maybe the scene that slides through
is a wedding at a bowling alley
or a romance in a small village shop—
the sign on the door says WINE.

A tiger once told me you can’t edit art.
“Life is the art,” he says. “Show me life,
and I’ll show you art.” I say to the tiger,
“How can I not show you life?”

“That’s what I mean,” he says and then leaps like a tiger into the underbrush.

The receptors refresh,

and sometimes insist on a memory.

And so there might be a scene from the distant past that burns over. It is January, 1900. A young couple walks along a sidewalk when they find etched in snow: “Happy New Year.”

The man in his long coat reaches down to cross out “year” and writes “century.”

His lady says, “What does that mean?”

He replies, “Happy New Century, Dummy.”
The American River can take a body as good as the best of them, but we skirt it looking for an afternoon. Hello dear, I say from here. I had a hard time leaving and there are songs to say such things, but my mistake was to cross a road so unencumbered with pay phones. I couldn’t reach you when I most needed to, and now, here I am lost to the new coast. You may never see me again. But I know what you look like, should you give up and chase me—or I give up and chase back to you. Foolishness happens in small moments, and true fools act on those moments. In the thick band, we were lovers. It was good being lovers. But “lovers” seems so kissproof and untouchable. No one would have a problem kissing us, or talking. I’m suddenly loving southern rock, the amber in the squirrel’s tale. I’ve met new people. Second Helping. I keep in touch with Jim. Short on hard drugs, we mostly chase this river.
Bang

Meeting in the smooth jazz of the eighties
would have been better, but this unforgivable
sunset with coconuts for miles will have to do.

There’s never been an American vacation
when the American didn’t spread some small piece
in the sun of that other land

and I am no exception.
Standing in the omelet dawn—how could I recover?
Coming back to this has been empty running.

My flight too late to find blood for chores
the week will fine the weekend—
leg tired climbing a symphony of floors.

I color in the calendar waiting for carryout
in the golden light of the place where they make the food,
the egg roll like a sunset in the oil. Burn me

slowly, sun. By swimming on I’ll catch the rope
and be safe in the water, knowing you may call
and you may not. The goats may take your voice

and for years I’ll wait on the feathers
and sixteen may pass or thirty
and whatever the message

may you post a bulletin or I hear your singing or read your book
and like a genius on speed I will find you
and on some clear night lose my citizenship.
House Servant Found Near the Vault of Valentino

A clear evening about to take over
from a clear afternoon—
I couldn’t read upside down
but as she spoke into the receiver
I made out the phrase, trouble will soon.

Madam Judas always terrified me.
Old friends couldn’t predict her traditions.
When she and Leo split, he uttered, upon leaving:

A bird watcher should not attract attention to herself.

I think she was from Latvia.

She felt like Miami.
I asked her. She said, Don’t bring up the past.
She was ready for the flavors of cold chicken and sun tea.
The temperature of neither had yet to adjust:
the chicken still chilling, the tea steeping.

Uprooted from the U.P. to Los Angeles
I was leaning on the everlasting arms.
The first guy in here said, Madam Judas is your baby.
Like I’m experienced with lovers.

The bristles on her shins are all I remember.

When she went for my arm

it was a stub-cut, not a de-limbing.

She had lost her whetstone.

For weeks she had me looking for it.

I bled only for an hour.
Scuffing around this island
the cigarette ashes
belong to those that just left,
the wind still smoky as they dip
into their cars.
Inviting guests
to the hermit’s cabin
when not the hermit
you feel the cuckoo. Entertaining
not a right
and so getting to do so
a feeling like pride—
glitter humping in some unused room.

Like truly old-fashioned rabbit ears
I had stretched myself.
One feller was interested in cars,
said these hills would be good
for testing corners, for taking
an advanced test. I stammered, Music
has been lost to the war. Clashing
with models is my new love.

Then pressed for an explanation:

I clash with them until their lungs give out
and their arms split
like wings of swans
trying before finding flight—so when they hover
water falls from their tails
and you say, this is not magic.

A crowd sometimes presents a vacancy—
time enough to poach something in olive oil.

I caught a list of dreams
one girl had. She took my last slice
of pie. I offered it. There’s the box.
She reached through the window,
wiping hands on board shorts
as she ate it away. As she talked I wondered
if saying the word “loneliness” aloud
is easier than saying “hello.”
The King boys had a carport

sort of like this.

They had a grandpa with a hillbilly zoo.

He was a departed Amish and so

shunned. One late summer day

I walked over to find two baby

black bear. They were like those

furry worms, sliding on the

slick and grey concrete.

Most people are able to care for themselves.

Most people know how to leave.

For me, the ocean’s black is always there.
Danko’s Nudie Suit

Oh Nudie, I didn’t know you tailored
Danko a suit—the vest listed as missing, stolen
from a long ago Malibu wall.
Nudie, a niece doesn’t think one would wear
the suit—it’d be good for a wall.
I’d like to think I could walk it out

but Rick Danko was slim in ’75.
White leather smoke along some Malibu wall,
some sunset, some Zuma.
The white sand skin, make what you want

of the scenery. Oh Nudie—roses, roses, simply.
No *Grievous Angel* embroidery

with *the* marijuana, *the* women, & *the* pills.
Nudie, I didn’t see those blue stars.
Notes

“A Long Nap”: Sandy Denny, a member of Fairport Convention, died on April 21, 1978 due to a brain trauma suffered after falling down a flight of stairs.

“After Dinner”: This poem references the spiral bound *Folk Hymnal for the Now Generation* published by Singspiration Inc. in 1970.

“Golden Ties”: This poem references the White House Record Library started by the Nixon administration, updated by the Carter administration, and sent to the basement by the Reagan Administration.

“These States”: The penultimate line paraphrases a lyric from the song “I’m Saving Up Coupons” written by J.E. Mainer and Jimmie O’Neal, performed by Bill Monroe.

“Coal Dock Road” borrows the phrase “a-level with the poplars” from Ezra Pound’s “Near Perigord.”

In “Tennyson Road,” the phrase “Don’t do ‘em like Chaney did” is borrowed from the folk song, “Kassie Jones,” as performed by Furry Lewis in 1928. This version can be heard on the *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

“Shyville Road” echoes a familiar line from Ezra Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.”
“Danko’s Nudie Suit”: In 1975, Rick Danko, bass player and vocalist for The Band, had a suit tailored by Nudie Cohn, the famous western ware designer. It was auctioned on E-bay in 2008. Another notable suit, also referenced in this poem, was designed for Gram Parsons, whose album *Grievous Angel* was released posthumously in 1973.
“Here everything seems clear¹:” Observation and the Ecological Tradition in the Poetry of Robert Hass

¹ From the poem, “Palo Alto: The Marshes” (Emphasis Mine FG 27)

Q: How can poetry affect the imagination of government?

A: There are instances: Thoreau read Wordsworth, Muir read Thoreau, Teddy Roosevelt read Muir, and you got national parks. It took a century for this to happen, for artistic values to percolate down to where honoring the relation of people's imagination to the land, or beauty, or to wild things, was issued in legislation.

—Robert Hass in an interview with Sarah Pollock

John Elder says in his Foreword to J. Scott Bryson’s book, Ecopoetry, that “[P]oetry itself can manifest the intricate, adaptive, and evolving balance of an ecosystem” (ix). He goes on to say that “[t]his can be true in the case of individual poems [or] in the sometimes surprising wholeness of a given poet’s oeuvre” (ix). Though the poet is uncomfortable with the title “nature writer,” if one examines Robert Hass’s five collections of poetry, it becomes apparent that Hass’s work is in step with the tradition and consciousness of ecopoetry, or ecological literature, namely the tradition that includes Californian forefathers like Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, and Kenneth Rexroth, but also the prose of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. This essay will trace Hass’s development as a poet of the environment, noting how his work addresses the themes of humanity’s interconnectedness with nature, and most of all, showing how observation can be a type of conservation. Which, of course, begs the question—is observation a type of activism, should it be, and if it is, can it still produce good poetry? Hass’s poetic career, as it progresses, seems to complicate these questions. As his poetry has changed, and become more complex, through the poet’s obvious concentration
on the facts of the world—human and non-human—and the facts of language, his work renews and re-presents ecological concerns.

Having an intimate and intricate knowledge of his surrounding environment, Hass writes poems that offer examples of what Bryson has called “ecopoetry,” which he defines as "a subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues” (5). Ecopoetry has three criteria. First, it should acknowledge the “interdependent nature of the world,” and Hass’s poems certainly present such an interdependence. Second, it should feature a “humility” for “both human and nonhuman nature” (Bryson 6). Hass's admiration of Robinson Jeffers—whose theory of “inhumanism” he knows well—doesn’t keep him from rejecting such bitterness towards humanity. As we will see in Hass’s latest poems, the human experience often leads to the nonhuman, either as retreat or as measurement of human life’s inferiority to the scope of the inhuman. But both are connected. Third, ecopoetry should proceed from “skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe,” a criterion that Hass, the citizen, may possess, but that the poet struggles to keep in check (6).

Like many poets in the ecopoetry tradition, Hass has been influenced by Gary Snyder, Robinson Jeffers, and Kenneth Rexroth. Critic Gerald Haslam notes that “[t]he influence of Rexroth and Snyder can especially be seen in the Asian delicacy with which Hass is able to celebrate what might otherwise be mundane experiences” (331). Cuisine is also, clearly, a Californian influence, though Hass is also influenced by “the transcendentalists [who] scoured and resculpted the terrain of American literature, with Wordsworth as the sustained blizzard from which they gathered force” (Elder ix). In an interview with David Remnick in 1981 (two years
after the publication of his second book, *Praise*) Hass confesses: “I had read a lot of the body of traditional English poetry and, of course, Robinson Jeffers. I had a lot of that memorized and…the poet who mattered to me most was probably Wordsworth, whom I really loved” (18).

But it wasn’t just literature that the young poet was studying:

At the same time, I was taking a course in this great books program in which, instead of the usual course in biology or botany, they gave us a pair of binoculars and turned us loose to watch birds for a semester. They gave us an essay by Darwin and an essay by Aristotle. At the end of the term, we had to turn in our notebooks of observation and an essay on whether looking at things and classifying them was real knowledge or not… In the meantime, I kept huge notebooks full of soul-searching and things like that. Strangely, it never occurred to me to put the two things, the notebook of creatures and plants and the notebook of interior warm-ups and practice to be a writer, together. [Remnick 18]

It can be fair to assume, as Remnick does when interviewing Hass, that *Field Guide*, selected by Stanley Kunitz for the Yale Younger Poet’s Award in 1972, was the place where Hass brought the two together.

In an interview with Susan Ives, shortly after taking the Poet Laureate post, Hass echoes the connection with his sense of place and its particular history—most often California, of course—in his development as a poet:

Well, when I started writing, I was very interested—somewhat self-consciously interested—in using a sense of place in my work. One reason was my passion for
natural history. I'd learned the same lesson from the traditions of natural history
and the traditions in poetry that interested me—which was to pay attention.

Hass is a poet for whom “work”—collecting, sampling (not unlike the scientist)—is apparent
(and even highlighted) in the resulting poetry. (If one were to do a concordance of Hass’s œuvre,
the word “notebook” would perhaps appear the most.)

The opening poem from *Field Guide*, “On the Coast near Sausalito,” exhibits this
fascination with place and natural history. Through a playful occupatio Hass presents an ethos
capable of an intricate description of the sea:

I won’t say much for the sea
except that it was, almost,
the color of sour milk.
The sun in that clear
unmenacing sky was low,
angled off the grey fissure of the cliffs,
hills dark green with manzanita.

Low tide: slimed rocks
mottled brown and thick with kelp
like the huge backs of ancient tortoises
merged with the grey stone
of the breakwater, sliding off
to antediluvian depths.
The old story: here filthy life begins. [FG 3]

In these two stanzas, the speaker is trying to represent the scale of life: human, nonhuman,
geological. The “filthy life” could signal a problem in the geo-environment, or the “filthy life”
of a human forced to make difficult decisions, personally and ecologically, or the clash of sea
and land.

This energetic opening, with its forceful charge, does two things. First, it introduces the
reader to Hass’s subject—the California coast—and it truly is *his* subject. It also introduces his
self-awareness. The poet “won’t say much for the sea.” It is important to note, as critic Terry
Gifford does in an essay on Gary Snyder—that “post-pastoral poetry must work as poetry” (80).
The opening line shows the poet making a decision: how to handle this; how much to tell; how to tell it. Gifford writes that the “post-pastoral” “avoids the traps both of idealization of the pastoral and of the simple corrective of the anti-pastoral” (78). Though I wouldn’t define Hass as a definitive “post-pastoral poet”—one could argue that Hass’s work arrives from a similar tension, that of addressing ecological concerns and facing the task of making good poetry.
In third section of “Sausalito,” Hass supplies a recipe for a trash fish. Thematically this stanza is pertinent to an environmental discussion, not only for its “prehistoric” reference, but also for its example of finding a use for a supposedly worthless fish:

The cabezone is not highly regarded
by fishermen, except Italians
who have the grace
to fry the pale, almost bluish flesh
in olive oil with a sprig
of fresh rosemary.

The cabezone, an ugly atavistic fish,
as old as the coastal shelf
it feeds upon
has fins of duck’s-web thickness,
resembles a prehistoric toad,
and is delicately sweet. [FG 4]

The final stanza of “On the Coast Near Sausalito” might come too close to being “an idealization of the pastoral”—or even, as Pound would say, too “viewy” (Gifford 78):

But it’s strange to kill
for the sudden feel of life.
The danger is
to moralize
that strangeness.
Holding the spiny monster in my hands
his bulging purple eyes
were eyes and the sun was
almost tangent to the planet
on our uneasy coast.
Creature and creature
we stared down centuries. (FG 4)

 That the speaker and this prehistoric fish have a moment perhaps reaches too far into an idealization. A kinetic joy runs throughout much of the poem, but in the closing stanza, the speaker announces that it is dangerous “to moralize”—and yet the final two lines step into that territory. Not to put too much emphasis on this poem, but it delineates borders and passageways that the “eco-” or “post-pastoral poet” must negotiate. On message, however, the poem exemplifies the first two of Bryson’s criteria, highlighting an interdependence of, and humility for, both the human and the non-human.

 The most consistent of Hass’s poetic tools is his use of description and observation. (As an editor Best American Poetry Anthology in 2001, Hass’s two “touchstones,” in an Arnoldian sense, for making his selections, were posthumous poems by Elizabeth Bishop and James Schuyler. When it comes to representational poets, these are the best the American Twentieth Century has to offer: painterly, but also, speculative.) In “Fall” the speaker reveals some of the trademarks Hass will develop (and even satirize) in his later poems:

 Amateurs, we gathered mushrooms
near shaggy eucalyptus groves
which smelled of camphor and the fog-soaked earth.
Chanterelles, puffballs, chicken of the woods,
we cooked in wine or butter,
beaten eggs or sour cream,
half-expecting to be
killed by a mistake. “Intense perspiration,”
you said late at night,
quoting the terrifying field guide
while we lay tangled in our sheets and heavy limbs,
“is the first symptom of attack.”

 Friends called our aromatic fungi
“liebestoads” and ate only the ones
that we most certainly survived.
Death shook us more than once
those days and floating back
it felt like life. Earth-wet, slithery,
we drifted toward the names of things.
Spore prints littered our table
like nervous stars. Rotting caps
gave off a smell of musky loam. [“Fall,” FG 5]

Hass is an epicurean—a ‘foodie,’ to use a contemporary term. In the above poem the speaker defies nature’s threat in order to experience the mushrooms “cooked in wine or butter.” This poem deftly expresses the tension between humanity’s desire, and fear, of nature. That mushrooms are “terrifying”—these mushrooms are clearly divorced from the hallucinogenic variety—speaks to the power of nature as the unknown, something spooky. Hass’s appreciation for the natural world—and poetic activism to preserve it—is analogous to the level of perception and observation required for preparing a plate of food, especially when faced with a minefield of toxins, and also, in the case of “Fall,” the potential for aromatic, delicious butter-cooked flavor. If the mushroom presents an unknown—and the unknown is made of flavor and terror—empiricism can be a type of remedy. Cooking and science are two ways to define, alter, understand, and shape nature. Hass, as he says in “Fall,” is a poet drawn “toward the names of things”:

When I started doing botany and natural history in college, part of it consisted of learning the names of things I already knew, sensually, as familiars of childhood, and there was a kind of power I felt learning the names. I felt like I was the secret owner of everything that I had come to see carefully enough to be able to give a name to. It wasn’t merely a matter of having a label for something, because in order to name it, you had to know it in its uniqueness. And the other thing, I suppose, to return
to the theme of California, was that everything was changing so fast. The whole post-war experience in America was going on, and my study was a way of holding on, a way of making things that I valued stay put. By getting to know one species of grass from another, one species of bird from another, and by knowing the names, they could stay put. I thought.

[18-19]

Conservation. Naming as a way to preserve a species. Hass’s propensity for the names of various species and biota reflect a type of literary conservation.

And Hass’s knowledge extends well beyond species of grass. Here are a few examples from *Field Guide* that reveal Hass’s obsession with avian taxonomy:

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The night they bombed Hanoi
we had been drinking red pinot
that was winter the walnut tree was bare
and the desert ironwood where waxwings
perched in spring drunk on pyracantha [“Maps” 8]

Yews as tall as pines
and lonelier
lean to the weather there
dark against the sky.
Gulls hover,
herons ride the wind
across the bluff,
their great wings wide. [“Graveyard at Bolinas” 17]

Walking, I recite the hard explosive names of birds:
egret, killdeer, bittern, tern. [“Palo Alto” 24]

The air was thick
with birds, linnets like wounds,
slow towhees, dumb earth-colored birds,
```
hawks over head riding the wind. [“Lines on Last Spring” 22]

Hass, for the most part, seems to keep in mind Aldo Leopold’s light-hearted dictum: “The seasoned ornithologist knows […] that […] subjective interpretation of bird behavior is risky” (20). The birds aren’t anthropomorphized (except perhaps for the “dumb earth-colored birds” in “Lines from Last Spring”) but they are consistently situated within the conversation of human concerns, like the lines from “Maps” and “Palo Alto” that allude to the Vietnam War. Just as in “The Pornographer,” in which Hass uses a bird metaphor in an unlikely place: “He likes the sun and he is tired / of the art he has spent on the brown starfish / anus of his heroine, the wet duck’s feather’s tufts / of armpit and thigh” (47). Hass also notices the local extinction of particular birds in “The Return of Robinson Jeffers:” “The pelicans are gone […] The grebes are gone / That feasted on the endless hunger of the flashing runs / of salmon […] He feels a plain man’s elegiac tenderness” (42).

But just as bird names are peppered throughout the poems, these birds play a role in the milieu that makes Hass a definitive poet of place. Larry Levis, a contemporary Californian, describes Hass as the most obvious poet of place, and purports that “[t]o name a place, in memory, is to singularize the Self, to individuate the Self, and to maintain belief in the power of the place through its name” (Emphasis Levis’s 54). It follows, then, that Hass’s propensity toward taxonomy extends to his notation of place names. Lawrence Buell writes in The Environmental Imagination:

[A] sense of history as sacred memory is evoked by certain spots: trees, commons, churches, cemeteries. But for all cultures, the art of bringing to full personal consciousness and articulating a sense of place is arduous, and for new world settler cultures especially so, given the relative shortness of their history in
place. These cultures face the uphill battle of jump-starting the invention of place-sense by superimposing imported traditions and jerry-building new ones.

[257]

In “Maps,” Hass touches on the “sacred memory” and the past’s ability to exert a print on the “personal consciousness”:

Chants, recitations:
Olema
Tamalpais Mariposa
Mendocino Sausalito San Rafael
Emigrant Gap
Donner Pass
Of all the laws
that bind us to the past
the names of things are stubbornest [FG 9]

This “stubborn[ness]” arises from humanity’s haphazard development of the land. Lawrence Buell would offer the following reasons for this “stubborn[ness]”: “Whether from laziness or a desire for security, we tend to lapse into comfortable inattentiveness toward the details of our surroundings as we go about our daily business. Place is related to complacency psychologically as well as etymologically” (261).

“A comfortable inattentiveness,” Buell’s phrase, is also a practice that permits humans to settle a land with a certain disregard. Hass in his poems expresses a desire to combat the human tendency toward inattentiveness, towards being blind to the qualities of place. His attentiveness is transformed into a subtle form of activism. In the poem “Black Mountain, Los Altos,” rather than lamenting the intrusion of humans on the environment with a shout, Hass uses his skills as attentive observer to rhetorically move the reader from the natural to the unnatural:
Only
three species of tree in
all these hills: blue oak,
buckeye, and patches of
wind-rasped laurel.
In the old quiet the Indians
could have heard bells
at Mission Santa Clara
where the brown-cowled padres
taught the sorrowful mysteries
with a whip. They
manufacture napalm
in the fog where Redwood
City sprawls into the bay. [FG 6]

Hass’s attentive eye documents the evolution of the environment, including the effects of
humans on the environment. Noting such a change, he charts a moving thing. The essence of
change is difficult to capture, but Hass’s poems provide an analogue for what Elder calls the
“intricate, adaptive and evolutionary balance of an ecosystem” (ix). Yet throughout his career—
an observational quality indeed—names remain important.

But what does naming—apart from intelligence—have to do with being human? Hass
offers a statement in his widely-anthologized poem, “Meditations at Lagunitas,” from his second
book, Praise:

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of the general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of _blackberry_ corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies. [4]

To name is to kill: “a word is elegy to what it signifies.”
We talked about it late last night and in the voice of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone almost querulous. After a while I understood that, talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice, pine, hair, woman, you, and I*. There was a woman I made love to and I remembered how, holding her small shoulders in my hands sometimes, I felt a violent wonder at her presence like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat, muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.

Longing we say because desire is full of endless distances. I must have been the same to her. But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread, the thing her father said that hurt her, what she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous as words, days that are the good flesh continuing. Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*. [4-5]

This is the side of Hass that is at odds with his desire to represent the world solely with the objects of the world. Alan Shapiro writes of “Meditations,” “[T]he thinking, abstracted from the particulars of actual experience”—the lover, the “island willows,” and so on—“has been archly academic, just the kind of thinking Hass indulges in often and consequently so distrusts” (87).

Larry Levis argues that “Hass’s poem intends, like so many poems since the Romantics, to create the same spiritual place, but Hass is more aware of his traditions, of exactly what he is doing, and it is this which allows him to suggest that we are baptized, not into a location, not into any body of water, but into names, into a river of names” (54).

*Human Wishes* is a book (as the title suggests) of human concerns: marriage, art, family, health—and yet nature appears consistently in the poems. *Human Wishes* is a book of the cyclical. In the poem “Spring Rain,” Hass follows the lifecycle of rainwater; “Late Spring”
ruminates on the inevitable growth of children; “Spring Drawing 2,” in its loose, prosaic stanzas, forces the reader to consider issues of waste, mortality, and the cycle of life across generations:

So we try to throw nothing away, as Keith, making dinner for us as his grandmother had done in Jamaica, left nothing; the kitchen was as clean at the end as when he started; even the shrimp shells and carrot fronds were part of the process,

and he said, when we tried to admire him, “Listen, I should send you into the chickenyard to look for a rusty nail to add to the soup for iron.

The recipe, a tradition, has been safely carried across two generations—and the nail, if Keith were to include it, would refresh the duty of the nail, a metal of the earth used as tool for human pleasure, potentially called on for a dietary use as well.

The poem continues to employ this cyclical theme—including a concern for generations—through the life of a rose bush, and the death of an antelope:

Because I have pruned it badly in successive years, the climbing rose has sent out, among the pale pink floribunda, a few wild white roses for the rootstalk.

Suppose, before they said silver or moonlight or wet grass, each poet had to agree to be responsible for the innocence of all the suffering on earth, because they learned in arithmetic, during the long school days, that if there was anything left over,

you had to carry it. The wild rose looks weightless, the floribunda are heavy with the richness and sadness of Europe as they imitate the dying, petal by petal, of the people who bred them.

You hear pain singing in the nerves of things; it is not a song.

The gazelle’s head turned; three jackals are eating his entrails and he is watching. [HW 13-14]

This poem’s succession of scenes does much to reinforce the cycle of life, mortality’s role in that cycle, and the poet’s role in this system. And there is an agreement. “[E]ach poet had to agree to
be responsible for the innocence of all the suffering on earth,” one finds out, though in the poem prior to “Spring Drawing 2,” Hass writes: “Poetry proposes no solutions” (HW 11). But what of the poet’s “innocence?” Caught in the bind of apprehension, the ability to see the cycles of “suffering,” even to be able to present that “suffering” in art—and yet Hass’s speaker knows he can do little, if anything, to help. It is also important to note that “silver or moonlight, or wet grass” are naturally occurring and that they mimic the theme of change: the “silver” must become an alloy to reach stability; “moonlight” comes and goes, as if on a loop; “wet grass” grows, and is either cut or dies, then grows again. The cyclical nature this poem expresses makes one think of William Rueckert’s theory of poetry and the biosphere, wherein poems are said to be “inexhaustible sources of stored energy” (108).

The first section of Human Wishes presents the inevitable cycle of life, while illustrating how “wishes”—to stay young, to write a poem, to stay alive—turn on a smaller wheel than that of nonhuman concerns. Private human life—though of weight on its own register—charts a smaller path. Hass writes of Jeffers: “And finally there was the leap—to the wholeness of things, a leap out of the human and its pained and diseased desiring into the permanence and superb indifference of nature. The possibility of this leap became at first the central wish and, finally, the doctrine of his poetry” (xxxi). Yet Hass—at least in his poetry—never denies the human role. Often human pain makes tangible the larger environmental situation, as in poems about disease, alcoholism, drug addiction, and breast cancer.

Though Hass may foreground human pain, he also notes its relative insignificance. Human Wishes contains many poems with ecological concerns: “Berkeley Eclogue” is an…urban pastoral?; “Human Wishes,” the poem, perhaps satirizing Thoreau, tells the story of a chimpanzee the speaker sees on television who uses a “willow branch” to retrieve ants from an
—then, a non sequitur shifts the poem to a rumination of a cupboard his wife bought in Saffron Walden, becoming a poem about objects and tools and the animal drive to use them. “A Story About the Body”—a much-anthologized, stunning prose poem—confronts the issue of disease and the body, as well as the human cruelty that can arise from the stigmatization of disease:

The young composer, working that summer at an artist’s colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, “I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you that I have had a double mastectomy,” and when he didn’t understand, “I’ve lost my breasts.” The radiance that he had carried around in his belly and chest cavity—like music—withered very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I could.” He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl—she must have swept them from the corners of her studio—was full of dead bees. [32]

In Sun Under Wood, Hass moves on to poems in which human suffering could be said to reflect the suffering of the natural world. Though Hass is a poet who, like Aldo Leopold, desires, on some level, to be “eye-deep in the marsh” (19)—in the middle of things, lacking sympathy for the human—he is unable to achieve that transparency. His concern is, first, human. Buell writes of this crux in The Environmental Imagination: “It is hard not to care more about individuals than about people, hard not to care more about people than about the natural environment. Any attempt to compensate for these overbalances must struggle against large odds” (167). Hass doesn’t overcome these odds, but he does recognize the relative scope of human versus the natural world. Hass says:

As an artist, you have the job of working out whatever is given you to work out.

In Sun Under Wood, I found myself realizing that I had to write the poems of
middle age, which were to me poems of what's irreparable in the world, the ways you've fucked up in your own life, things you can't change. Yet compared to the scale of injustice in the world, how do I write about this? At some level, you have to be able to say, "This is my task." It's in small, local ways that you keep yourself alive and refresh ideas that are always going into dead abstraction. [Pollock]

“My Mother’s Nipples,” from *Sun Under Wood*, is a pastiche that narrates the speaker’s memories of growing up with an alcoholic mother. The poem opens with the transformation of a natural land to a settled, developed, cul-de-sac. The speaker revels in the sensory details of the place, natural and unnatural:

They’re where all displacement begins.  They bulldozed the upper meadow at Squaw Valley, where horses from the stable, two chestnuts, one white, grazed in the mist and the scent of wet grass on summer mornings and moonrise threw the owl’s shadow on voles and wood rats crouched in the sage smell the earth gave back after dark with the day’s heat to the night air.  And after the framers began to pound nails and the electricians and plumbers came around to talk specs with the general contractor, someone put up the green sign with alpine daises on it that said Squaw Valley Meadows. They had gouged up the deep-rooted bunchgrass and the wet alkali-scented earth had been pushed aside or trucked someplace out of the way, and they poured concrete and laid road—pleasant scent of tar in the spring sun—  [12]

Notice the names. The stanza shifts from naming the natural to naming a construct of civilization. We see the transformation not only from a “valley” to a “meadow,” but from a named region to a named housing development. In fact, the “Meadow” is kept, finally, *only* in name. And yet an activist poem wouldn’t concede that the “scent of tar” was “pleasant.”
The narrative of this poem, like many poems from *Sun Under Wood*, relates the details of irredeemable events. In this case, the tragic decline and death of the speaker’s mother. In the following prose passage Hass presents a recollection of a blackout:

> I came home from school and she was gone. I don’t know what instinct sent me to the park. I suppose it was the only place I could think of where someone might hide: she had passed out under an orange tree, curled up.

[21]

It is interesting that the mother in an intoxicated, unnatural state, seeks (perhaps unknowingly) the park: an urban translation of “nature.” The scene comes near the close of the poem where the speaker confesses: “I tried to think of some place on earth she loved. // I remember she only ever spoke happily / of high school” (*SUW* 22) These lines reveal a desire to purify the tumultuous life by reaching for nostalgia. High school, for many, later in life can symbolize a time of innocence. In a sense, then, the past has been equated to a place on earth, a place pure for the mother—a place before innocence becomes extinct. High school predates impurity. The park, for the mother, represents an artificial return to purity.

*Sun Under Wood* addresses another personal event: divorce. But in the poems, nature often provides, if not an escape, at least a distraction from the crisis. In “Sonnet,” the speaker, perhaps as defense, ignores the ex-lover’s voice (a sort of premature volta), and instead focuses on the garden:

> A man talking to his ex-wife on the phone. He has loved her voice and listens with attention to every modulation of its tone. Knowing it intimately. Not knowing what he wants from the sound of it, from the tender civility. He studies, out the window, the seed shapes of the broken pods of ornamental trees. The kind that grow in everyone’s garden, that no one but horticulturists can name. Four arched chambers
The speaker satirizes his own propensity for taxonomy by deferring to the horticulturist, leaving the fauna unnamed. The divorcees are no different than the “patient animals”—the pain of the conversation is trumped by nature’s distraction. “Love” is the short view, less significant. As human pain runs high, a non-human scene provides an escape.

This same notion appears in “Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer”: “Private pain is easy, in a way. It doesn’t go away, / but you can teach yourself to see its size. Invent a ritual” (57).

Hass’s speaker’s ritual:

Walk up a mountain in the afternoon, gather up pine twigs.  
Light a fire, thin smoke, not an ambitious fire,  
and sit before it and watch it till it burns to ash  
and the last gleam is gone from it, and dark falls.  
Then you get up, brush yourself off, and walk back to the world.  
If you’re lucky, you’re hungry.

Once again Hass draws back to nature—in this case the speaker is in Korea:

Was I going to eat the baby chick?  
Two pancakes. A clay mug of the beer. Sat down  
under an umbrella and looked to see, among the diners  
feasting, quarreling about their riven country,  
if you were supposed to eat the bones. You were. I did. [58]

On the surface this is a poem concerned with manners and customs. Will the American act like an American or a local? Will he be an insider? One could also read this decision to “eat the bones” as a willingness to accept the whole, the larger picture.

Personal decay gives way to environmental flux—all irredeemable actions. These actions are presented with clarity, even for the cuckold in “Faint Music”:
There was a pair of her lemon yellow panties
hanging on a doorknob. He studies them. Much washed.
A faint russet in the crotch that made him sick
with rage and grief. He knew more or less
where she was. A flat somewhere on Russian Hill.
They’d have finished making love. She’d have tears
in her eyes and touch his jawbone gratefully. “God,”
she’d say, “you are so good for me.” Winking lights,
a foggy view downhill toward the harbor and the bay. [SUW 40]

The penultimate stanza of this poem pairs the burden of his lover’s infidelity with a
retreat to, as in “Sonnet,” to the nearest nature, in this case to the back porch:

And he, he would play that scene
once only, once and a half, and tell himself
that he was going to carry it for a very long time
and that there was nothing he could do
but carry it. He went out onto the porch, and listened
to the forest in the summer dark, madrone bark
cracking and curling as the cold came up. [41]

Hass says in an interview that “Poetry is a way of living, I think. It’s a human activity like
baking bread or playing basketball. […] What ought to distinguish it in that way is
craftsmanship which is not distancing, though it does throw your attention off yourself and onto
the work to be done” (Remnick 22).

In Hass’s poems it is clear that an ecological consciousness has informed the poet, though
his poems resist presenting an “indictment;” as a citizen, however, Hass’s activism is more overt.
As Poet Laureate from 1996-1997, Hass used the post as a sounding board for the
interconnectedness of human beings and the environment, and addressed literature’s role in the
ecological conversation. Hass said he wanted to use the post to “blow on the coals” of nature
writing (Ives). One of the requirements of the Poet Laureate post is to organize a literary series
Community” and continues to hold an annual event (of the same name) in Berkeley, California. He is also the founder of the “River of Words” contest, wherein K-12 students submit poems about the environment (Ives).

An advocate for the inclusion of an environmental consciousness in the nation’s secondary curriculum, Hass feels that one should be educated—perhaps calling on his own early notebook experiences—by the land. As Poet Laureate he made “nature literacy” a priority: By nature literacy I mean literally knowing the plants and animals of your region, knowing your watershed and how it works. […] Everything is divided up into disciplines. Literature is over here, art over here. Now we’re going to do science, now history, now mathematics. But when and how do we learn what we’re walking on?

In the canons of literature, what are the books people must read? Everybody has to read Mark Twain and Herman Melville in school. How come everybody doesn't have to read John Muir or Aldo Leopold or Rachel Carson? Or why doesn't everybody have to read Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia? If there's anything that's particularly characteristic about American civilization, it's that we developed this strain of nature writing that was a mix of science and literature. Thoreau and Muir between them put it right in the center of the American imagination. You can't make an account of the American experience without them. So nature writing is a very powerful tradition in American writing—not just in Thoreau but in lots of writers. Who would Faulkner be without Mississippi or Hemingway without northern Michigan? [Ives]
In spite of Hass’s activism, he distances himself from the title “nature poet.” Critic Maggie Gordon reports that once after a poetry reading, while discussing his work with River of Words, Hass said: “Of course, I’m not a ‘nature poet’” (Gordon 221). She concluded:

I understood the distinction he was making—he went on to discuss what he referred to as the ‘thematically driven’ work of Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder—yet the remark took me by surprise, knowing how rooted Hass’s poetry is in the spirituality of day-to-day living and in an awareness of the interdependence of human and nonhuman nature. Perhaps he was correct to emphasize in his response that he does not seek to confront explicitly environmental issues in literature the way some do. Yet it is evident throughout his poetry, from *Field Guide* in 1973 to *Sun Under Wood* in 1996, that Hass’s way of being in the world engages ecological principles and that a personal sense of the sacred interconnectivity of all life does inform his work. [221-22].

Hass’s impulse to negotiate around the term “nature writer” is intriguing. His poems usually keep ecological politics from becoming polemical, though wars and social concerns get a more direct treatment. Hass says in his 1998 preface to *Field Guide*, that the Vietnam War is “everywhere in the poems” (“Preface” viii). Yet a mind in favor of an ecological ethic is also everywhere evident. For example, “How I Seized the Pentagon” starts with what seems an absurd, slapstick ambush of the Pentagon, then we see that the fantasy comes from a speaker who is backpacking:

Washington was calm, murderous, neo-classical.  
More lies than cherry trees and nothing changed.  
And drowsing home through northern Pennsylvania  
the dawn fooled me. Dreams. We talked  
and, half-asleep, my body hummed. We were too excited.
After dark searchlights had cast troopers
in huge shadow on penitential stone. I saw
two shadows raising clubs to beat a girl,
a sickness in my stomach and a worse one in my head,
a pleased sense of historical drama, of the aesthetics
of evil. We were too excited. Eyes open, eyes closed.
I saw frost bleach the hills to western grass
and dreamed of small-breasted girls,
jack cheese, the smell of sweat, the acrid
smell of sage. Hiking, and morning woke me
to a maple blaze.

The poem is blatantly political, perhaps to a fault, yet “a maple blaze” deftly huddles a spectrum
of meanings, from the “blaze” of the “maple” to the “maple” of “maple” to the “blaze” of
weapons of war. This reminds one of the “rough-legged hawk” in the opening pages of A Sand
County Almanac that “hovers like a kingfisher, and then drops like a feathered bomb into the
marsh” (4). But in the poem the “feathered bomb” is hushed and surreal. With the concern of
soldiers in Vietnam the larger “inhuman” concern of the land emerges at the close of the poem:

    I thought of pepper trees,
survivors, modest local gods, tough barked,
of an easy grace and bitter fruit
which grow in riven country near the sea
where spring is clement and the land an aftermath. (FG 56)

Robert Hass argues that Jeffers “wrote great, long-lined, turbulent poems, full of rhythms
of the sea and as cold and passionate and morally indifferent as the sea itself” (xxv). Hass’s
poetry can’t be said to feature such shrewd indifference. His speakers long to observe and report
the world, even a world in decay. Yet in any representation of the natural world (and the
behaviors of humans in that world) the language with which the poet speaks should offer clarity,
even when describing human behavior and other abstract concepts. Hass’s poems are full of
images and his speakers often have a layer of irony, ensuring the poems will never quite achieve Jeffers’s level of polemic. Dana Gioia, in his essay “Strong Counsel,” argues of Jeffers:

Perhaps what makes Jeffers’s poetry so important to environmentalists is exactly what repels academics. More than any other American Modernist Jeffers wrote about ideas—not teasing epistemologies, learned allusions, or fictive paradoxes—but big, naked, howling ideas that no reader can miss. The directness and clarity of Jeffers’s style reflects the priority he put on communicating his worldview.

[45]

Buell notes, though, that “Jeffers’s poems are beginning to enjoy a certain vogue in today’s age of unprecedented environmentalism” (162). Yet Hass’s resistance to the label “nature writer” and his resistance to write poems like Jeffers, that “teach[…] humanity the way to be” likely stems from his knowledge that the “social conscience has come to seem increasingly suspect” (Buell 163; 35).

Hass’s poetic and civic stance is admittedly conflicted—in fact, such conflict could be said to inform his poetry. Alan Shapiro notes that Hass possesses an exceptional ability “to describe the world around him” but that “his interest in description proceeds from a disturbing desire […] to live wholly in a world of sensory experience and from a concomitant distrust of intellectuality,” though “Hass is a plainly intellectual writer” (84). One sees this in “English: An Ode,” from Sun Under Wood. Concerned with the crux politicized / activist poetry creates, Hass crosses a certain meta-layer to confront this issue, though, in verse:

There are those who think it’s in fairly bad taste to make habitual reference to social and political problems in poems. To these people it seems a form of melodrama or self-aggrandizement, which it no doubt partly is. And there’s no doubt either that these same people also tend
to feel that it ruins a perfectly good party
to be constantly making reference to the poor or oppressed
and their misfortunes in poems which don’t,
after all, lift a finger to help them. [65-66]

And as if to be both at once humorous and self-critical—what does Hass do?—he pulls us out of this ethical question to say: “Please / help yourself to the curried chicken” (66). With this culinary reference Hass’s meta-concerns are undercut, intentionally deflating the issue of politics. Then he takes it a step further: “Wouldn’t you like just another splash of Chardonnay?” (66). Later in the poem the speaker quickly flashes to a scene seemingly unconnected with the poem’s larger narrative. This scenario could be said to be the inner-voice of critique, a speaker that could laugh at the poet of Field Guide: “Years later one of the young poets at Iowa, impatient / with her ornithologist boyfriend, his naming / everything to death, her thinking bird!, bird!” (67).

Though some of Hass’s early poems idealize nature [“we stared down centuries”], his ability to represent humanity’s relation to nature aligns Hass with Environmental Justice critics who say that “[p]retending to isolate the environment from its necessary interrelation with society and culture has severely limited the appeal of environmental thought, to the detriment of both the natural and social worlds” (Reed 147). In Hass’s poems, the entanglement of human concerns with the environment is ever present. (Hass is never totally ‘in the bush,’ except, perhaps, when translating haiku.) His ability to express this interconnectedness becomes more apparent in his books, Human Wishes and Sun Under Wood, and his latest, Time and Materials, where he writes of a crux, in “State of the Planet”:

It will seem to be poetry
Forgetting its promise of sobriety to say the rosy shinings
In the thick brown current are small dolphins rising
To the surface where gouts of the oil that burns inside
The engine of the car I’m driving oozes from the banks. [53]
It would be overreaching, however, to assert that these poems approach activism, but they do attempt to “find,” as William Rueckert writes, “the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural—can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere,” or in the case of the above poem, struggle against each other (107).

Throughout Hass’s work one senses an ecologically-minded player at the table, and yet Hass’s sense of style—what is allowed in a poem—is in continual evolution, often working to suppress a pedantic statement. As Alan Shapiro and Maggie Gordon have noted, Hass is a conflicted poet. Torn between the physical world and the world of ideas, politics and art, the public and the private, his poems are never quite sure-footed. Yet this is not so much a fault, as it is a quality any poet will experience when negotiating terms of different registers, when one operates from an interconnectedness of one’s work with the world. In fact, conflict can make for intriguing poetry, often presenting unexpected transitions and issues. A recipe? A bird? The tug of a new rhythm? A fish? Hass, as a young man, perhaps, said it best:

Catching one, the fierce quiver of surprise
and the line’s tension
are a recognition. [FG “On the Coast Near Sausalito” 4]
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