

# [From the Bowels of Arcadia: Tim Earley's Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery](#)

written by Marty Cain | September 17, 2015



*Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* by Tim Earley  
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Tim Earley's third collection, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, changed the way I view the relationship between language and place. Specifically, it's a book concerned with Appalachian North Carolina, as well as rural life in general. But more broadly, it addresses many of the dilemmas associated with representing a particular region—what does it mean to aestheticize a place? To what extent does it precipitate a necessary violence? What does poetic narrative do to the body, to a collective identity?

It's difficult to discuss any representation of rural life without broaching the subject of the pastoral, and historically, the pastoral has facilitated a kind of violence. Traditionally, the pastoral posits a hierarchical relationship between the authorial gaze and the rural space. The author functions something like a voyeur; in the same way that the male gaze reduces a woman to an object, the pastoral poet violently reduces the rural landscape to a passive, bucolic monolith of crags, hills, and dells. Ultimately, the pastoralizing gesture is one of *description*—which is to say, it approaches the landscape as a static, lifeless entity. It's significant for this reason that Earley's new collection appropriates the title of John Clare's 1820 collection, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*. As an undeniably pastoral poet, Clare's title preserves the power dynamic of the pastoral: it is the job of the poet to exert dominion over the rural space, both reducing it to a fetish object and reaffirming a stable humanist identity for the poet.

For Earley, the appropriation of the title is slightly ironic. Over the course of 100-some pages, Earley's discursive prose poems waver in and out of transitivity, putting stress on the patriarchal, humanist, and heteronormative qualities that are commonly associated with Southern poetry, the Romantic impulse, and the pastoral tradition. Earley fuses an incantatory regionalism (akin to Frank Stanford and Aimé Césaire) with a giddy, fragrant language-fucking in the vein of Catherine Wagner. While many of the poems seem to emerge from the voice of a demented human speaker, others refuse to be human at all:

dog recourse a new attachment. it like a hose and suck up febriles. Its

heart get a new chamber that make it moreover a human and timeless except for its tongue. I rub its belly it pardon my murders. and dungal fleep and dead-rot gristle and each little thing a horsehair wilderness and infinite really and even without wings.

Multiple times over the course of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, Earley conjures the image of a copperhead swimming in a baptismal. In certain ways, this visual is emblematic of some of the most significant themes of the book. On one hand, it suggests the threat of inhumanity: if Christianity embodies the humanist principles typical to Western culture, the copperhead is a source of violent contamination that reveals humankind's malleability. But additionally, the copperhead reminds me of Milton's Satan, who takes the form of a snake, and who, rather than slithering on his belly like a post-lapsarian serpent, bounces through Eden on his rear end like a demonic spring. In this moment in *Paradise Lost*, the transmuted serpent is the harbinger of mortality and chronology, the *et in arcadia ego* force—Eden is neither slithering nor walking, neither pre-lapsarian nor post-lapsarian, neither living nor dead.

The pseudo-pastoral landscape of Earley's poems functions much in the same way. It exists in a liminal space, undead, unliving, not-quite intransitive, not-quite inhuman. The poems are deeply internal, and this is a stark contrast to the traditional pastoral, which is ultimately concerned with externalities: capital-N Nature is a passive, artificial object that the poet observes. Joyelle McSweeney's concept of the [necropastoral](#) pushes the artificial, necrophilic aspects of the pastoral to a decadent, surface-obsessed level. But Earley's poems aren't exactly necropastoral; rather than focusing intensely on the surface, they churn intensely *beneath* the surface, clamoring inside the jaundiced belly of the pastoral space, the bowels of Arcadia. Perhaps another phrase for this realm is what Earley refers to as the "oracular cavity," a space which is "utterly without teeth," which resists transitivity, capitalism, and ultimately, Cartesian dualisms altogether:

I fondle wish and limp refulgent. those teach the wound feelingly I see it feelingly the horticultural transgression wilding in its praxis. the marquis has a hole in his proof that stretches to Uncle Lordy and display him straight in that smokehouse the drunk uncles and the schizophrenic cousins and the manic grandmothers hung and gopher-eyed and that is a dandelion misters and that is strange garments misters and that is the world and that is the sun. they had moduced them tanticles and were moduced right back inflamed past account. we subhuman fucks I misantic and thrapple ye all my memory is a spot of imposter toil foul and gaining.

Writing from within the Arcadian innards, Earley displays an acute awareness of the outsider's gaze—a gaze which, particularly in the case of Appalachia, will default to viewing rurality as either abject (e.g. *Deliverance*), idyllic (e.g. Robert Morgan), or both. To be a "subhuman fuck" on one hand means to fulfill the external world's conception of rural poverty, but it also means to possess the Orphic forces of the oracular cavity, to inhabit the hole in Arcadia where Renaissance humanist principles collapse—a hole which is post-

human and pre-language, embodying a poetics less transitive and more somatic, which is still able to see feelingly (like Gloucester), even when its eyes are gouged out by mortality and the forces of late capitalism.

I am not from Appalachia, nor am I from the South. However, I am from a rural, remote area, and this is perhaps one reason why I identify so strongly with *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*. Unlike a lot of affected, touristy, supposedly rural poetry, Earley enacts a truly local poetics, resisting the easy associations readers might have with rural and/or Appalachian life. But while the poems are clearly regional and discernibly Southern, they also defy the notion that a landscape and culture can ever be truly “described” in the sense of the title—which is to say, wholly assimilated into language. This is particularly true in the way that Earley manipulates temporality. Pastoral literature, as well as much of the canon of Southern narrative poetry, is often associated with an overriding sense of nostalgia—in the case of pastoral, a yearning for a Golden Age, or, in the case of many Southern narrative poets (e.g. Robert Penn Warren, James Dickey, Rodney Jones, etc.), a lost rural childhood. Through the process of regional nostalgia, the poet places a frame around the rural space, confines it to a singular temporality, and ultimately alienates the narrator and audience from the reality of the landscape.

Towards the beginning of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, one of Earley’s narrators proclaims, “I piss upon your digital age.” On a surface level, this line might seem to resonate with the pre-industrial fetishization that is typical of so much Southern narrative poetry. But in reality, the sentiment seems at least partially ironic. Like C.D. Wright’s *Deep Step Come Shining*, Earley’s book collides Southern regionalism with a postmodern attention to form, as well as an acute awareness of dilemmas pertaining to the postmodern South—ecological violence, industrial oppression, and the continuing legacy of racial inequality. If the overriding depiction of Appalachia is the cloistered space of abject horror in *Deliverance*, Earley’s book is like the real-life Rabun County, Georgia, whose tourist economy was greatly boosted when *Deliverance* was filmed there. As a definitively regional book, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* is about the South, but a South cross-contaminated by the violence of media, chronology, labor, and the external traumas of culture at large. While many of the poems do gesture towards the past with a kind of memoiristic wistfulness, any sense of stable temporality is quickly dispelled:

I’m pretty sure the animals in that forest were as intelligent as three to five year old children. I’m pretty sure I was raised in a bomb shelter. I’m pretty sure the people who ate and slept with me were not my parents. They were not even good people. I’m pretty sure their eyes were gleaming obelisks. I wanted the forest primeval to close in around me. I wanted the sun to enclose my heart.

Even while Earley’s poems are discernibly Southern, they refuse to adhere to kudzu, whiskey, junked cars, and the rest of the Dickey-approved canon of Acceptable Southern Nouns. Bomb shelters, zombies, and hams all collide with Appalachia, continually reasserting the landscape’s refusal to be assimilated into nostalgic or trite language.

In the same way that the *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* resists a stable temporality, it also defies the tonal registers that might be typically associated with Southern poetry. Part of what makes the poems successful is their highly varied and variegated sonic textures; arcane diction and theory collide with vernacular and colloquial phrases, coagulating into a language that resists any easy categorization:

there were doodle bugs. we adored them with little sticks and rhymes. far away the invention of the begrimed peasant. far away a humping mongrel and his poke of angular trout. far away the remains of an Irish pissprophet do not sulk. they do not see the ingrates and diasporic functions in the trembling luvials. the finance minister and the microbe conjoin in green arrears.

It might be easy to articulate Earley's anachronistic diction as a kind of self-conscious code switching, and some have certainly interpreted his work that way. For example, [in a 2005 review](#) of Earley's first collection, *Boondoggle*, Marci Nelligan claims that Earley's work "suffers from an identity crisis." According to Nelligan, Earley is off-putting because he "is as comfortable in his Teutonic intellectualism as he is in his Wranglers." The statement appears to operate under the classist, elitist assumption that rural life is somehow detached from the possibility of intellectualism. Further, Nelligan's statement suggests that Earley's divergent forms of diction and ideology are intended to be some kind of novelty—that by pairing supposed country bumpkins with Derrida, blurring "high" and "low" diction, Earley is intentionally engaging in gimmickry. But at its best, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* reveals this to be a false binary—it's often impossible to tell which words are theoretical, which are vernacular, and which are invented by the author. As a result, the poems veer in and out of transitivity in a manner that is both disorienting and, to put it bluntly, a fucking pleasure to read:

I have danced myself chopless and shankless was the last thing he said before she died. All those flowers gathered from the mole-encrusted dark and feathery hillside did not seem silly to us any longer. How did your asshole smell when it passed your nose, how did your savior return to you through the moaning nomenclature, how did the horseman and obscene pursuing mob gain the apex and mingle their pablums and die on the crystalline thrusts like the good staded beasts they have always become and always been, admirers or not of the traction beyond.