

NO MATTER HOW WILD

by

Stephen Minnich

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities and Social
Sciences

Date: _____ Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

No Matter How Wild

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Stephen Minnich
Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 2015

Director: Susan Tichy, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



This work is licensed under a [creative commons attribution-noncommercial 3.0 unported license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

DEDICATION

To Jules, the shadow of a memory; and to Emily : everything.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	v
Epigraphs	1
Poems	3
Notes and References.....	60

ABSTRACT

NO MATTER HOW WILD

Stephen Minnich, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2015

Thesis Director: Dr. Susan Tichy

This thesis chronicles through a series of interrelated poems the passing from one relationship to the next, with a focus on the subject's working within a society in which patriarchal identity is examined and a human's capacity for violence is constantly at the forefront. In many ways, the poems endeavor to ask, or answer, the question, 'what happens when one considers another as loved before considering that other as human?' The results are varied and displayed variously through event, aftermath, and meditation.

*Every true poet is a monster.
He destroys people and their speech.*
<Tomaž Šalamun>

*If I am sick, there is no proof whatsoever
that man is a healthy creature.*
<Czesław Miłosz>

I.

no spirit lingers in
the chair where we once sat

there is nothing

no ghastly magnet field
raising hairs on my arm
or the back of my neck

no soft glow in the corner
of the kitchen where
you once stood waiting
by the stove as I
ground coffee fried eggs

there is nothing

and yet here I am
staring at the corner
imagining the sun's
reflection in your hair
as if I see for the first time

II. *plastic fire chief hat*

rendered useless by the crack which runs straight
through its rim though really it was useless
all along its plastic shell hardly cover
flawed safety from its inception vibrant

red now bobbing in the pool where it was
tossed in anger no sadness in distinct
longing for who carried it to this house

here to this house once its sharp red plastic
atop your yellow hair but you are now
borders away conversing in Spanish
and the hat now cracked and empty floating

III.

white face in white ink
on every corner
of every white page
as I sift through stale
poems this blued glass
I drink transparent
tint of your eye which
once looked past me to
the ceiling on my
pillow each morning
a brown hair sun stained
yellow curls round
 round
none of these are yours but to you
I give them all the same
 yes all the same

IV. *redbreast : dream*

hair falls straight round your
face brushes your cheek

my lips cannot yet
read or feel details

in your jawline or
cheek and eye eye and

eyelid slowly I
detail things as

I see them : robin
egg shells seeking rest

on a bed checked nest
tender construct wool

woven in red breast
the robin supple

presses to my lips
to wake me again and

V.

again the blue dark
and even the neighbor wakes
breaks some ceaseless night

VI.

The deer stood shadow
-less blank asking no
questions offering no
explanation but
simply watching as
sluggish dazed I walked
wishing only my
hand full of berries
which I could quiet
behind me to say
'Come, deer, we'll go
there where the snow
reflects a faceless moon'

VII. *pressed penny*

I miss the clacking turn of the gears and slight
bump of each pull. Some of the presses would miss the mark
brand only half the crafted canvas and I
would try the machine again its resistance
as the coin bit into place the compress bearing down

VIII. *aubade* : *memory*

first to wake again the slow
senses reorient one
among sheets wrinkled sun stabbed
curtains parted by night song
still echoing a water
kneaded across desked pages
turning words to shapeless shape
black drain ink
 a butterfly
a bird
 but lying in bed
still separating pages
from others wondering which
to save or which truth I see
in spreading ink is you shaped
slender curved like glass emptied
by wind wake wake again wake

IX. *exert and come part*

Resilience of thin film

tissue : solid wall housing the muscle of your calves, your long
legs pounding the asphalt, pounding these walls, fascia; swelling with energy
against these walls, at pains for some way out : a still-growing Alice eats cookies
in the house of the white rabbit.

The fascia will not yield,

it must be cut to allow
growth of the pulsating muscle;
precise incision creates room, grants the interior access beyond
its walls : these legs forcing the door outward, hands pushing the roof skyward
give Alice the room she needs to breathe.

White of the surgeon's wall

contains this soft shell still unbroken through the human body :
the same connective tissue from one leg to the other, the muscles in
each arm, your back, your chest : not the fascia added in segments under the roof
of the house, but the house itself.

To beg for some other

relief to heal this body without the intrusive cut of
a blade; that I might press my fingers to your skin, your legs, the unyielding
soft casing unbroken through your body : I, some hopelessly sentenced rabbit, try
to understand these Alice dreams.

X. *pressed penny*

My brother older always got the shinier
pennies to put in the machine – my collection holds
grotesque coins blackened green. Compressed feather flat
they sit now marked in sleeved booklets on dressers
or in forgotten drawers : lost talismans powerless

XI.

after stopping in Maryland
on an island in the middle
of the bay driving route 3-0-
1 north to avoid the auto
-mated 4-wheel pileup that is
interstate 95 on my
way to Philadelphia back
to the nest for the summer :
a full tank of gas
a bag of chips
jug of water
an open highway
unlit smooth velvet
and a mind to just keep driving north
until I can't drive any farther

XII. *redbreast : memory*

I recall waking to the sun
falling across my eyes my arm

across your stomach and the press
of your back against my chest you

stirred nestled brush to my body
my stomach my breath parted strands

of your hair I held my lips just
there flush to your jaw pressed to your

ear my teeth squeezed light I could feel
the weight of your breath while you rose

above the sheets grabbed my hand and
lipped feather whispered my ear yet and yet

XIII. *do I wish you past*

I feel a bear inside
my throat my lungs my
clawing to get out
and I in fear

passed
might such imbalance
release this monstrous
thirst swallow us all

XIV. *plastic fire chief hat : shadow*

as buffer from this world sick
house with dust the hat lies near
forgotten. A Dalmatian

I call her Alice stares out
from a sticker denies still
I focus : open a drawer.

Fold a shirt. Again. Rise. Light
the wick the candle tendrils
smoke to ceiling to offer

bed to sheet and shirts cleaned and
the plastic the Dalmatian
the waxed fire licks her ear and

I absent place her on my head. We watch
Alice and I together : the smokes rise
the candle lights the flame grows still and larger

XV.

there was another here last night and you
are gone gone to some rich coast or other
country call it Costa Rica you lie
comfortable in a hammock so I will
tell it : I burned them. all of them. the poems
I'd left flutter by the desk the ink black
water drained blue and spreading but let me
tell you : she came last night she said something
like 'hi. my name is Emily.' as if
she knew precisely what to say and how
those words so beautiful or yes those words
so plain but the poems see those glitter jeweled
pages how they burn and when dropped into
a stone urn the water in its basin
how they fire soak damp and crackle and smoke

XVI.

gust inside the door
a picture hides browned behind
wilt philodendron

XVII.

In the corner of my garden tilts a small charcoal
grill left behind by some long gone tenant, sooty ash
dusting the square basin. I watched as moss grew,
tough grass, ivy, clover, nitrogenizing
black dust husk into fertile soil, giving earth.

XVIII. *self : dream*

I feel a semtex
inside of me or my
body mold a blast
capped chest.

Under my ribs

the pale of yellowed
teeth fills each organ.
This plastic so soft
and pressed already.

But where the fuse

how to detonate
to go off and what
destroy. Not so that

might I could explode but imagine
what I would bring to rubble.

XIX. *aubade : memory*

Was someone sleeping
in this room. Did not to wake her
no you wanted to slip the covers silent
your arm on hers through the night. But first a light
on the desk the dim globe a yellowed shade
light on the desk across the way but a step –
tread light. step once

until I feel the rug
under my foot slide left
and the bookshelf behind
yes I remember this
room its smallness my right
foot against the clothes piled
by the dresser

the jeans shorts sweatpants and yes
the sweatshirt you would wear again and again
before washing. step on one
knee on the ottoman
use it sorry desk chair
to lean against to place
on the desk a glass of

water yes the desk
against your ribs was so close but yet to haste
against the glass you'd just placed on the desk spilled
its contents over the papers the papers
hush a curse she woke again to hush a curse
the lamp the lamp again the water crept to
shake the papers dry the sweatshirt and her hand

against your thigh

but here to hold please hold

no look at her look

look at her in the soft light : her face still turned
she won't you can't see she won't see see she won't

XX. pressed penny : dream

What seemed a normal game but suddenly I
found we were all sent to jail if we couldn't get out
with some pass or luck we were posted to slate
grey steeled box the last to go I watched as she
was knifed in then a sabre : head back red glint please o

XXI.

You call her to return, your
silent muse, but it is not
her that you long for. It is
the shadow cast beneath you
from the ceiling light, shifting
as you move, dark reflection.
With the window open through
this autumn day, such shadow
is soft, is some fuzzed and greyed
figure as you pace the floor
in contemplation of her,
she who has left you here to
cast behind your own shadow
theater in fragments while
the slanted light of the sun
on the wall portrays a charred
figure growing darker, larger

XXII. *detonate : dream*

When your mother receives your letter she calls fast your
cell then Emily's then pours another coffee
and tries your roommate. "My son –" she trails. Imagine :
the carafe pours and pours; mother already in
tears. Your father bounds up to hold her, shuts his eyes
to your word and asks for forgiveness; his son knows
not what he's done –

Three roommates sit round lit candles,
sage. Then one : *I didn't think – he really had it
in him.* Another voices out : *HOLY SHIT. WHAT
THE HELL. JESUS.*

Your brother still has no idea
how his sword, left to you, lies : hilt pressed to carpet,
bladed bodies left behind.

Finally, the last :
Should have known – he wrote a sonnet. All's rubble now.

XXIII. *pocketknife : dream*

I recall falling
asleep, my head
on her thigh, gentle

stroke of her finger.
Each seat a bench
facing the other

window. Was it a
bus? a yacht? does
that matter? There were

no belts to fasten,
and that is that.
We were surrounded

by friends, on our way
to some fair or
park. She was smiling.

When you awoke your head was against the window;
she was gone. You looked out to see a familiar

neon sign. It had switched sides of the road and was
now on the wrong side, facing the wrong way. All wrong.

You asked where she was and got vague answers. *She stayed,*
or, perhaps, *She'll find her way back.* None of these friends

could calm what came rushing back to you then, a flash
recall of the in-between. You had woken up

already. You had argued. You had yelled. You had.
You gripped something, tight. Your hand, you felt then, was still

wet from the stress of it. Your pocket knife a lump
against your thigh, your jeans dark and damp, you were sweat

all over. A shifting shape was growing larger
as it bled through your pocket. The knife, pushed slightly

open, had pressed into your leg. Blood stained the red
handle, glinting blade. The white cross on it – smeared.

XXIV. *shadow thrush*

when you surveyed the courtyard garden overcome
by underbrush and mint and plants left to grow wild
scragged tree pushing one branch through overlapping
cracked wood slats into the neighbor's yard a second
branch another rust cornered grill overflowing
in ash and charcoaled ash how inevitable
was the chainsaw buzz through twin bushes overgrown
guts the yard your bare hand uprooting intertwined
strangle vine what stayed your hand on that last pull

and I notice for the first
time a nest

exposed to view from the heart
of a deforest tangle
their prickle-pocked pink skin stretched
or gathered and their eyes un
-opened visible beneath
they see nothing clearly blurred
shapes of dark dark and darker

when you wiped your brow with your sweatband lettered BO
all navy stain your brother's friend dead on impact
with the grill of a car ahead a shift oasis
hazed blank hooked back how or why did you fear parents
might abandon at your touch your hand stayed

and mother in her jet black
robe is cautious watches me
days later from the highest
reach of a scraggle tree while
I fail to identify
her jet black glow her children
exposed and father's softer
stomach matte black and wings sheen
glossed not a robin or thrush
to be found but small : too small
to be a crow

XXV.

imagine an eleven year old boy
walks enthralled by just everything watches
a group rush buoyantly to stare at some
new gadget or never seen before toy

this boy would he to wish liquidity
of glass to reach through a window that he
might hold might love a dream but just to but
really just a window only to look

so you too dream some jeweled clarity but
in hand a whiskey glass melts a sweat
unlifted since some earlier wasp went
looking sweet and drank and low such honey

XXVI.

refrigerator
from its dark hollow corner
buzzes through the night

XXVII. *plastic fire chief hat : Alice*

the pride in her eyes cast
black and jaded with weight
in what vacuum drained— but
dust settles here again

the world is a dark place
she'd say— projected in
flashes and light— the crow
still caws and the thrush— sings

well look Alice— my hand
trembles my lungs— listen

do you—star red hound— hear
my breath rattles and sways

what stands or gains what
view remains hidden
by dog stickered eyes

but the hat this cracked
hat named and grieved
else is thrown away

XXVIII. *pressed penny : memory*

You were not there when he died. In some stories,
the driver was drunk. Or : Bo was drunk, underage, and
running. Your brother was there or he wasn't.

What it comes down to is this : he was churned from
his feet; you won the scholarship marked once in his name.

XXIX. *torso of a young man*

This body is a display
piece, adorned in metals, put
on a pedestal. There was
at some point another, a
different torso, limbs angled,

shaped differently, maybe built
from some other material.

What happened to separate

this young man from his partner?

Is he lonely now, stomach
elongated, crotch of bronze,

held in a museum as
show, some art or work finis

XXX.

the power of an adjective
is in particularities –

Here you name her
yellow-haired girl allow yourself
to inhabit her with any
blonde-haired blue-eyed girl who may have
once wished to have her eyes described
longingly as robin egg shells.

When I speak of Emily's jaw –
the line a certain obtuse angle
that fits into the crevice of my collarbone –
the crook of her extended nose
pointing outwards as if suggesting some distant future –
her grey-fogged eyes which when the pupils constrict
display depth in a ring
of flecked hazel
and in summer show green through the mist –
she remains herself

else she has become a blank slate
on which you paint nothing
and in which anyone might live

XXXI.

late storm stained leaves voice
oak red thirst musing autumns
susurrus unveiled

XXXII. *pocketknife : memory*

You had fallen asleep in the backseat of your
brother's Pontiac, shuffling through the afternoon

on your way to the mall to get your then-girlfriend
a Valentine's Day gift. Your brother and his friend

are just along to hang out, or maybe for the
spectacle of a freshman kid trying to build

the most romantic stuffed bear he can imagine.
Are these details important, these clinging memory

drafts of some younger you lustfully bounding out?
It was the last time you saw that car, so there's that.

I don't remember
if my brother
ever owned his own.

I remember mine,
the squared white cross
on its red handle

marking it as *Swiss*,
as *important*.

It had three different

blades and at least a

corkscrew and small
screwdriver.

I don't know the last
time I saw it but
I know it's gone now

has been for years

You were jolted awake, a
screech of rubber and metal. Your brother's droning

conversation turned to panic, gaspy as he
got out of the car, prepared for what was to come.

I don't remember
my brother being
particularly violent

but a certain look
comes over any
body in a rage :

pupils dilate, brows
pinch and ridge, lids
lurch under. I learned

this from him, practiced
in the mirror
until my face showed

blinded, perfected
execution.

And was that my pocketknife
tossed in the divot under
the telephone pole? I guess
when a perfect cylinder
is displaced from one's fender
and lodged into another's
exhaust pipe, certain actions
must follow. Through all of it,
though, I still don't know what you
thought the cops would want in a
simple pocketknife, nor why
you never went back for it.

And yes, I got her the bear,
though after the holiday
and that's hardly the point : when
the other driver stepped on
the gas to clear the street, where
were the fumes to go? And the
goddamned pocketknife : why did
you have it? and why in the
glove box? and why? and why

XXXIII. *confession : I*

cut the dimple of your right side
 paled the wine soaked glow of your cheek
 angled your face to avian
 I tamped the sun fire of your hair
and called it 'yellow' I even
 painted your lips a deep deep red
 how could I
 understand how I might recast
your character where once you were
 woman you are moved to else to
 woman jeweled cast to fold center
 a still scene cut and and again
to get it right to slip the night
 silent my arm on yours there yours

XXXIV. *pressed penny : dream*

She has returned to you in the night alone
and broken. You know exactly what these hands might do
when two bodies come in contact under black
cloaked and counting stars. Perhaps it is healing.
Tell your love the truth : the dream is yours; was never hers.

XXXV.

and I feel you loosen
your hold round my neck as
I breathe what rush
now to lie here with her planting
sprouts of blood as she rakes her nails
through my back over my shoulder
blades claws combs the valleys between
vertebrae I
crawl my fingers
upward around the nape her neck
close my knuckles round and and thumb
finding the gulley between pipe
and chin she
– O
and she
quiets slowly meekly and I
released fall to her side as she
breathes bare a scratch a rasping wisp

XXXVI.

crickets chirping through
sliding glass; louder now, one
has made its way in

XXXVII. *self : belief*

There are stories of Socrates
enduring in harsher climates
wearing nothing but his sandals
a cloak and his beard in the wind

You must wonder about the cold, at what point
the frost might set in, might turn the sandal's thong
to a blade against a toe frozen to snap.

I wonder about the horned grebe
where it's gone and why its pied-billed
kin has come to call on the few
reservoirs still unfrozen here

Do you question the grebe's return? Do you doubt
that every year the grebe will leave an absence
filled by iced white fingers cracking the surface
of a closing lake? And here comes the hermit
thrush to dwell content in the berries' frost fall,
there the crow to its winter tree of thousands.

I understand the warm return
I've searched my life for contentment
for a consistency routine
but can't believe such conviction
such ritual diligence

There is nothing Socratic about the grebe;
it knows nothing of belief. Things change, the grebe
knows, and it knows to carry on. The thrush looks
only for a place to puff its chest, to rest
and be satisfied; and the crow – o, the crow
returns each year to caw among the murder.

XXXVIII. *pressed penny : dream*

I traced the outline of the monument as
I could remember it placing my hand in every
groove then the overwhelming sound of her hand
churning the gears or was it the other way
around it was she : squeezed between as I turned and turn

XXXIX. O

convenient only once we

oil and waterlogged were

two bodies wet with ourselves cast

at the other the lover

a body that can cloak the self

in a shadow warmed embrace

XL.

As you grow more abstract, I
realize my lament was not
for some lost relationship
once had with you, but rather
for the life I might have if
you were exactly
the specter
I imagined
when you weren't there.

XLI. *self* : *Alice*

it started with what
a feeling a brush
tingling a body
bared or some tender

some mouthing as with
out word or any
contact but one red
body another

what for some lost hum
or an other but
once the bed is shared
once the back is soled

stretched and stroked kissed or
broken what jewel then
left behind what hat
shadow memorized

XLII. *grebe : memory*

The air hangs heavy over the man-
drawn lake; little houses break the trees
in spots, off-white and white. They thin as
they grow : towered windows; opulence.

A row of small shops, displaying small
crystal objects or maternity clothes,
intermixes with restaurants and
ends in a single bench. I sit there.

Absently watching a horned grebe sink
lower into the water, I pick
at the tin foil remains of what was
an overstuffed burrito. Only

the head and neck still above water,
the grebe periscopes down. I've earned this
dinner, I reason to the grebe, which
replies, of course, with nothing. So I

tell it of my day : the children who
wouldn't listen to my tales, only
building their own stories casting me
me in the lead role finding new ways to

meet my end by magic, drowning, or
else. She needn't know, does she, grebe? of
the burrito, her endless calls to

good health; of the children's childlike nerve,

or my wandering thoughts, talking to
a bird that can't reply. But the grebe
looks at me, if only a moment,
knowingly. As if to say : my waist

grown, my breaths shortened, betray my health;
betray lessons planned on the drive in;
betray the conversation held here
with a water-bird, the grebe, the grebe,

when she is already home eating
dinner by the window, watching one
car after another fail to be mine.

XLIII. *pressed penny : memory*

I don't recall anymore which monument,
its domed ceiling or columned entryway. Underneath
the structure, a line had formed. Hardly waiting
my turn, I was punished to sit : a black seat
among a row of black seats; a staring brood, incensed.

XLIV.

And have I learned
something? Have I
grown?

When confronted with
the human monster
my hands
are stayed
no matter how wild
they may seem.

So perhaps I've learned
something. Perhaps I've
grown.

My neck creaks and
my back locks
and that
is enough

XLV.

march frost guard branches
rascal rattle husk cracked leaves
brittle autumns last

XLVII. *self : shadow*

looking through the glass
door a year later
the ground outside some
garden sicked snow melt
while upstairs window
sown seedlings soak sun
light a white to feed
and green yes growing
out of snow shadowed
soil soon the peppers
tomato melon
or flower and can
I soon believe this
the end of winter
this last frost past and
the birds back and all
yes all is well grown
in this wonder earth

XLVIII. *a beard a mirror*

I don't cut with a blade
anymore my hand stayed
some fish slick and rigor
stiff pierced hook snags a lip

but new tools dark polished
vibrating a bee drone
buzz flies combed red brown flecks
round and a clean splashed bowl :

O Emily

look

my face

is rubble

NOTES AND REFERENCES

II. Jan Dibbets, 1969 : *Roodborst territorium / sculptuur*

III. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Luke 24:5

IV. *Firehouse Subs*

IX. Chronic exertional compartment syndrome. Exercise induced.

XVIII. A plastic explosive with military and commercial uses : adaptable, hard to detect, voluminous.

XXI. Monopoly : capitalist dream, capitalist nightmare.

XXII. Seppuku : ritual suicide by disembowelment. Part of the honor code of bushido. Voluntary, punishment, for shame. Alternately known as hara-kiri, “the cutting of the belly”.

XXVIII. Bo Fisher Memorial Scholarship, 2008.

XXIX. After Constantin Brancusi, viewed at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian, 2013 : *Torso of a Young Man, 1924*. Of course there is another. It is made of wood.

BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Minnich graduated from the University of Richmond in 2012 before pursuing his MFA at George Mason University. He lives in the fabled Friendship House with a number of fellow poets and friends, where rent is cheap and talk is free and flowing. He maintains a garden there and often dreams of green fields and interrupted forests.