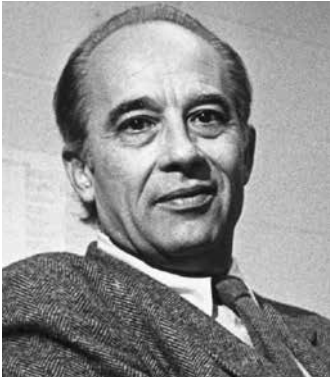


## “Brier Visions”: What Did He See?

by Jim Minick



Jim Wayne Miller, 1992  
Photo courtesy of  
David Stephenson

When I first read Jim Wayne Miller’s *The Mountains Have Come Closer* fifteen years ago, I was immediately entranced; it became one of my all-time favorite books, and it still is. But I have to admit on those first readings, I skipped this one particular poem, “Brier Visions” (26); it was too bizarre and didn’t seem to fit the pattern of the whole. I should’ve known better.

This past summer, a friend introduced me to Ed Snodderly’s musical rendition of “Brier Visions,” and this song made me go back to explore the poem by itself as well as its relation to the whole book. I discovered that the four visions the Brier has in this poem outline a significant progression in the speaker’s thought that also is the critical turning point of the whole book.

Before I analyze, though, I want to quote the whole of the “Brier Visions” poem:

### Brier Visions

Jim Wayne Miller

I.

When he thought hard, his mind became a plowpoint  
digging in, turning a furrow in his brow.  
Sometimes he struck a snag, a rock or root:  
the bright point rode up into the light,  
then dove deep again to his gee and haw.

II.

All the woods and weathers he’d ever known,  
his mind, when he took hope, turned sunlight  
slanting down through leafless trees  
in mid-March when redbuds blooming broke  
a jam of crisscrossed shadows in the coves.

## III.

Black as a crow his mind would fly across  
 stripmined land where muddy water heaving  
 rose and fell, red froth and foam,  
 bubbles of blood in the mouth of a gutshot deer.

## IV.

Like floodwaters rising in the night,  
 radio waves moved up the mountain valleys.  
 Coves and holler rocked with the city's flotsam:  
 Wrigley's and Lucky Strike, Ford and Goodyear.  
 Lifted off the land by a rising music,  
 trees cut loose by singing saws, the people  
 rode the receding suck of sung commercials,  
 floated like rafted logs toward the mainstream.

What does the Brier see in these four visions? In the first three sections, the Brier's "mind" is the subject, the trigger for the metaphor. In section one, his mind becomes a "plowpoint" that digs in and furrows his brow (26). When it hits a snag, the plow rides up into the light, but then dives deep again into the earth. Intelligence, for the Brier in this vision, comes with hard work and persistence, and it is tied to the earth.

The second vision focuses on hope, and here the Brier's mind finds it in mid-March "sunlight / slanting down through leafless trees" onto "redbuds blooming" and breaking "a jam of crisscrossed shadows in the coves" (26). The strengthening sun finds one of the first flowers of spring, the redbud tree, to open the winter woods. Again, like the plowpoint in the earth, the goodness of hope is tied to nature, to its cycles and beauty.

There is much good in both of these first two visions, but there is also darkness, the blackness of the soil being plowed, and the "jam of crisscrossed shadows" of the forest. This darkness seems accepted as natural, even comfortable, to the Brier in these visions, but that changes with the last two sections.

In vision three, the Brier's mind now "black as a crow" flies "across/ stripmined land" that heaves with muddy water. The section starts out with this aerial perspective of the crow and focuses with each line smaller and smaller to end with "bubbles of blood in the mouth of a gutshot deer" (26). Both mountain and deer have been treated with disrespect, the mountain denuded, the deer shot poorly and then not trailed, instead left to die a slow, painful death. Images of darkness fill this verse, the black crow, the ruined land, the muddy water boiling with anger, the meaningless death of a deer. Gone is the earthy darkness of nature in the first two stanzas replaced by the grim reality of human greed.

The Brier's fourth vision traces the slow disintegration of mountain culture. Radio waves, like rising floodwaters, carry "the city's flotsam" of commercials into "coves and hollers," and as they recede, these waves carry the people away on the "suck of sung commercials" pulling them "toward the mainstream." Just as the people act with disrespect for the mountain and deer in vision three, so are they acted upon with disrespect by the outside culture. They are "lifted off the land" (26), pulled away from their roots, and they go blindly and willingly. Again, the dark images are foreboding and based on human greed rather than nature's cycles. Here the Brier sees the darkness of the logged land and the resultant floodwaters, the grimness of lost traditions as the mountain songs are replaced by commercials and the ironic darkness of the

city lights that lure the mountain people away from their roots.

These four visions, then, move progressively toward darkness, to loss, from hopefulness of spring and new-turned earth, to the despair of ruined land and people who are both forgetful of their past, and forgotten by the mainstream culture. Each dream creates a darker image of where we are and where we are headed as we lose our connection to both tradition and the natural world. The poem of visions ends with little hope.

To understand the significance of this one poem, "Brier Visions," to the structure of the whole book, readers have to trace the progress of the speaker, the Brier, from beginning to end. In the first of the book's three sections, titled "In the American Funhouse," the main speaker doesn't know he's a Brier. He's planted somewhere in a northern suburb, away from the mountains, among "familiar strangers" (5). In the first poem, "Saturday Morning," the speaker keeps searching for a metaphor to make sense of his bizarre life, and finds it in the attic, where he realizes that he is "a suitcase someone else/ will live a life out of when we arrive" (4). He knows his life is empty like this suitcase, and rootless. The speaker also knows his visions are disjointed as in the poem "Certain Dreams," where he dreams of opening his fourth floor office to find a horse reading his bookshelves. "How did it get there?" he asks (8), and in turn, he probably asks himself the same question.

In the last poem of this section, "Going South," the speaker imagines his own death in a car on a busy highway, the angry traffic blocked, the stalled vehicle attracting the cops and news coverage helicopters. Meanwhile the "real news" goes unnoticed as "high over the town, /... a black river / of birds turned slowly and flowed south" (16). Like in the poem "Brier Visions," the dark images of humans (the "sooty news," the power lines, the traffic) are less important than the "black river of birds," the natural world that holds the real news. Also in this poem, it's important to note the speaker envisions his own death, the death of the old self rootless and lost in suburbia, the death that must happen before he can be reborn, before he can fill the suitcase of his life with his own identity.

Part Two of *The Mountains Have Come Closer* is titled "You Must Be Born Again," and here we find the Brier more and more reclaiming his identity. The change begins in the poem "No Name" where he no longer is able to say "I," no longer interested in small talk, but instead his mind becomes a fish seeking "a deep invisible flow," and he begins to move against it (20).

In "Turn Your Radio On," he calls up the image of the radio from "Brier Visions," and expands the metaphor, saying that he can't "hear his own thoughts in the city," and the city noise "even poured through his dreams" (21). As a contrast to this noise, he stares at an old photo of his grandparents on their cabin's front porch, and their faces speak to him, saying, "this place / belongs to us . . . and we belong to it" (22). He longs for that rootedness and realizes he won't find it here "settled in a suburb, north of himself" (28).

The poem "Restoring an Old Farmhouse," illustrates his slow transformation as he uses the metaphor of refurbishing a "weathered farmhouse" as a way to also rebuild himself: "Dismantling country feelings / Tearing down, building up again / from what was salvaged." He knows he has to rip out the rotted and useless from the past to find the good wood, the useable nails. The past and present mingle as "fresh sawdust / spume[s] yellow as sunlight from old timber" (29). He is heading home, both physically and spiritually, gaining voice and strength by becoming rooted in his home ground.

The final section, "Brier Sermon," finds the Brier mature and rooted now, its opening line stating, "Now his whole life seemed weathered and old-fashioned" (43). He has

come to embrace the good in both the past and present, making a living by crafting chairs in “The Brier Losing Touch with His Traditions,” but also having “some time to be himself” by drinking a beer and watching the news out of New York (44). He is more complex than both his own culture and the outside culture, because he has found his mind, now in this place and its traditions. He’s disheartened at the abandonment all around him, the “hollers / fallen silent since the people were swept / out like rafted logs on spring’s high water” (46). And he’s angry at how the outside culture abuses him, how the senators are “soft-handed / sons-of-bitches” (49).

All of this prompts him to preach, to go to town on a Saturday morning and set up his pulpit on a car hood across the street from the “Greenstamp Redemption Store” (52). This sermon, the final poem of the book, culminates the speaker’s long transformation from a lost soul in suburbia to a rooted man wanting to save his people from the same despair he experienced. He has understood his visions, in “Brier Vision,” as illustrating how he and his people have traveled so far away from their home, their inheritance, their spiritual ground. We have become a forgetful people, he proclaims, and though you can’t live in the past, “all the time, the past is living in you” (55). We’ve followed the suck of those radio waves and run to catch up with the rest of America, all the while leaving the best part of ourselves behind.

The answer to this spiritual death: “You must be born again and again and again” (63). This rebirth is like “going back to what you were before / without losing what you’ve since become” (63). The Brier has learned to embrace the best of both worlds, and sees this as the only way to remain whole and healthy in an insane world.

So while the poem, “Brier Visions,” is itself stark and ends on a hopeless note, the book as a whole, however, gives us much hope, as we move with the speaker back to the mountains to claim his past, realizing his identity is nothing if he doesn’t understand his history. The placement of “Brier Visions” is critical to this transformation, for Miller situates it in the middle of the whole book. It reflects backward onto the dissolution of our human race that the Brier himself experiences in his life in a northern suburb, and the poem projects forward, onto both the hope that comes from the natural world, and the need for rebirth. The Brier’s final sermon, “Brier Visions,” in this way, is the turning point, the heart of the Brier’s own rebirth, a transformation that allows him to see the darkness of our current lost culture, and a future more rooted in our history and its connection to the natural world. This healthier vision forms the Brier’s sermon, calling his street-side congregation to be born again. This final vision, the vision that fills the whole of the book, allows the Brier to finally see that indeed, the mountains have come closer.

### Works Cited

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 Snodderly, Ed. *Brier Visions*. Mountain Home, TN: Majestic Records, 2004.