

Afterword: Poetry of Place

When asked what first comes to mind upon hearing the word “windfall,” most people reply something like “sudden money.” The “rivers of the windfall light” in Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill” bring us somewhat closer to a natural setting for “windfall” in its original sense: “something, such as a ripened fruit, that has been blown down by the wind and found under trees.” This sense best applies metaphorically to our aims for this magazine, to encourage and support a poetry of Pacific Northwest place.

Against the current tide of globalization, we posit its opposite, “localization.” As Wendell Berry points out in *The Unsettling of America*, our culture and our literature valorize moving on, lighting out for the territory ahead of the rest, as opposed to staying in one place and knowing it well. However, our identity is tied to place: We don’t know who we are unless we know where we are. “In this hemisphere,” writes Scott Russell Sanders in *Staying Put*, “many of the worst abuses—of land, forests, animals, and communities—have been carried out by ‘people who root themselves in ideas rather than places.’”

Much of our culture encourages a denial of place and a focus on the manmade as central to the understanding of a place: the kinds of houses, restaurants, schools, people, and jobs determine what a “place” is like. When the economy nosedives, people move, or buildings are destroyed, we no longer recognize the place. In the reality of most of human history, “place” has been determined more by climate, weather patterns, animals, birds, insects, trees, and plants. The “feel” of a place, whether sacred or portentous or healing, came largely from natural elements. Our experience as well as our language is impoverished when we can recognize only the most generic of natural elements; we may know four or five native species of trees, but thirty or forty makes and types of motor vehicles.

Paul Shepard thinks that the lack or denial of our connection to the plants and animals in a given place makes us crazy. Rootless, detached people are dangerous. On the other hand, sanity happens when people understand that where they are is who they are.

Among contemporary poets, Mary Oliver has been one of the most articulate in stressing the importance for both poets and readers of poetry to connect poetry to the natural world. "Poetry was born in the relationship between men of earth and the earth itself," she says. "Poetry is a product of our history, and our history is inseparable from the natural world."

A poetry of place is a poetry which values locales, which sees and lets the reader experience what makes a place unique among places. In some respects, poetry of place is the logical outcome of modernist poetics, with its emphasis on image and the thing itself. Poetry of place demands the authentic, not just for the foreground, but for the background, too—because context (what we see as background) often determines meaning (what we see in the foreground): A jar on a grocery shelf is different from a jar on a hill in Tennessee.

In other respects, a poetry of place is the opposite of modernist poetry, with its highly foregrounded object and evoked feeling. Modernism and its heirs treat the phenomenal world as though all places were interchangeable, especially urban places. Much contemporary poetry focuses on psychological states, feelings, intellectual concepts, or language play totally devoid of reference to the real, lived, sensually experienced and infinitely varied physical world. Poetry of place may focus on such interior subjects, but it lets us experience them more profoundly and more authentically because they're rooted in a specific time and place.

The idea for *Windfall* came about in part because we observed that much poetry has become adjunct to the urbanized technosphere in which most of us live. Poetry today typically reflects the radical subjectivity that many of us retreat to when the external world is reduced to cityscape, politics, consumerism, and pop culture. Acute self-consciousness, often about writing or the use of language itself, becomes the main point, and the reader is invited to participate at the level of identification with interior states, abstractly stated, and only secondarily through commonality of experience. The external world is becoming incidental. Self-centeredness and lack of attention allow the environment to slide into further degradation, even though we all depend upon it utterly.

In its fullest sense, the term "place" in poetry includes not only the geographical location and natural environment, but the history of human

presence and before. "Place" includes the people living there now, and, as in all poetry, the voice of the speaker of the poem. As Leslie Marmon Silko says, "Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on." The speaker may be passing through, or better yet, a longtime resident of a place whose utterance might be instantly recognizable to other residents, while simultaneously offering insight to strangers resident elsewhere. As readers, we tend to grant a poem its place-names and other specifics of locale, because all places share such specificity. James Wright can title a poem "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," and we readers do not have to know who William Duffy is, nor do we have to have visited Pine Island, Minnesota. Wright allows place to speak for itself and for his presence there to be casually assumed. As Wright himself explained in an interview in 1979:

I'm not saying that the value of poetry depends on writing about a place or not writing about a place, only that there is a kind of poetry which is a poetry of place. It appeals to me very much...I think it is enough to say that there is, in our lives, a genius of place and so, appropriately, we sometimes value a poetry of place...This country has all sorts of places still to be discovered in it. With this idea has come the realization that, after all, anything can be the location of a poem as long as the poet is willing to approach that location with the appropriate reverence. Even very ugly places.

In fact, many of the places around us are what might be termed "ugly" through commercial development—factory districts, industrial parks, office campuses, and malls. A little research, whether by reading or asking around, or by plumbing our own memories, leads us into what Wright is talking about, "the genius of place." However a poem of place plays out, our relation to the world is on full display, and the world speaks through us.

The representation of nonhuman realities may be the greatest challenge of all. The language of myth, especially in the shape-shifting Paleolithic imagination, may be the closest we have come to a verbal representation of animals and landscape. In the Paleolithic world, as described by Calvin Martin, the human relation to nature is direct, intimate, physical, and spiritual in an animistic sense.

Beyond myth, the verbal means remaining to us have included images, metaphors, and the pathetic fallacy. We believe some new mode must be found, based in the concrete image, some equivalent to the revival of myth in contemporary terms, a transformation of history. Renewing the human relation to nature depends upon poets taking up this challenge.

Finally, we hope to encounter again a poetry that finds a pure delight in being alive in the here and now. Such delight is not exclusive to poetry directly expressing exuberance or ecstasy, but occurs whenever the poet reflects the external world in concrete detail, lovingly observed, even in darker moods. And surely, our strong emotions generated by “political poems” often stem from feelings of delight cut short by the hubris and shortsightedness of those who would dispose of nature itself—source of our common meaning and sustenance—for power or profit. In positive terms, we recognize through the resonance of the poem the texture of our own relation to some other place, a spiritual dimension. We hope that *Windfall* can be a source of such sustenance.

Bill Siverly

Michael McDowell

Works Referred to in the Afterword

Dylan Thomas, “Fern Hill” in *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (Ed. Daniel Jones, New York: New Directions, 1971), page 200.

Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977).

Calvin Luther Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking History and Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Mary Oliver, *Blue Pastures* (New York: Harcourt, 1995), page 58.

Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), page 117.

Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1982), page 124.

Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” in Daniel Halpern, editor, *On Nature: Nature, Landscape, and Natural History* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), page 84.

James Wright, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," in *The Branch Will Not Break* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), page 16.

James Wright, "The Pure Clear Word: An Interview with Dave Smith" in *Collected Prose*, edited by Anne Wright (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), page 195.