

Entwining Human Concerns and Particular Places

On page two of every issue we state that *Windfall* particularly emphasizes poetry “which is attentive to the relationships between people and the natural world.” We receive many excellent poems about “the natural world” and its importance to the speaker of the poem and to our culture in general. That remains a central value of *Windfall*.

But most of us spend most of our time in the human-built world of streets, houses, buildings, and human-sculpted landscapes, rather than in the “green world” beyond the more obvious human influences. In some respects, attention to the green world, especially the less sullied, more “pristine” areas, to the exclusion of the built world, takes our eye off the important place relationships we’re engaged in most of the time. With population increases and development, these most-lived-in places are constantly under pressure to change, often in ways that make them less of the places they were or that we’ve come to prefer, and less uniquely themselves. These places need poems.

Many if not most poems written today take place in “built” environments, but often the action takes place so totally indoors or in the mind that no details of the poem commit the action to any particular locale. Sometimes the locale is so generically rendered that the action of the poem could take place anywhere, as if “place” were unimportant, as if places don’t exert influences on us, as if each place doesn’t have what for millennia was called a *genius loci* or “genius of place”—a residential spirit who not only protects a place but also embodies the distinctive qualities of a particular locale which makes it unique and gives it a particular atmosphere or feeling.

We’re not suggesting that a poem’s subject, theme, and point entirely concern themselves with elements of a particular locale; poems needn’t be primarily about a place. A poem about anything else can be a poem about place: A poem about religion, love, loss, joy, sex, childbirth, politics, or war can easily be a “poem of place,” if the speaker makes

the connection between the action of the poem and the place of the action. This, perhaps, is the heart of our project—to increase awareness of the “genius of place” so that the poet knows when a particular locale must become part of the poem in order to accurately render the action of the poem.

One poem of place situated mostly in the “built” world is Matthew Arnold’s 1867 “Dover Beach.” The poem has had its impact over the past century and a half because of its attitude toward love, faith, western civilization, and political changes of the nineteenth century. But the poem would be dry philosophical musings without the establishment of the particular locale Arnold has chosen—not the city of London, not the countryside, but a port town looking across the body of water separating two countries and metaphorically separating modern England from medieval Europe and Ancient Greece. Standing in a room and looking out a window, the speaker tells the woman he’s with:

The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

After the first stanza’s lines of setting, the poem pursues its ideas without further description of place, yet the locale permeates the poem and perhaps most importantly supplies the concrete images to carry the abstract musings. “From the long line of spray / Where the sea meets the moon-blanch’d land,” the speaker asks that we listen to the “grating roar / of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling / At their return, up the high strand, / Begin, and cease, and then again begin.” This concrete, place-specific description carries us back two and a half millennia to Sophocles dealing with the “turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery.” Then the tide on Dover beach parallels the full tide of the “Sea of Faith” of the Middle Ages; each element of the local scene in Dover provides an embodiment of an idea that has nothing to do necessarily with Dover. But the result is that the beach at Dover becomes inextricably bound up with the ideas the speaker is ruminating.

Perhaps what sets Arnold’s poem apart from most preceding

poetry is that the place is not generic; he doesn't use a clip-art beach and universal sea, but he uses the particular beach at Dover, which is covered in stone shingles rather than sand or shell, and he uses the English Channel with its view across to France. The beach has its own particular sound as the waves recede, and the (artificial) light across the channel has its own particular way of gleaming. The experience would have been different anywhere else; the action and the place are bound together. Dover itself has become more important because of the connections the poem makes.

Many of the poems in *Windfall* engage in similar connectings of non-place concerns with a particular place important to the speaker of the poem but not necessarily in the green world. In this issue, for instance:

- Eleanor Berry's "Turning" parallels the turning of a tractor in a hayfield and the turning of the field's freshly cut hay with the speaker's turning sixty years old.
- In Raymond Greott's "Journey to the Heart," the speaker's weekend splitting of wood with a maul and wedge from sunrise to sunset comes to be understood through the commentary and actions of the raven and crows on South Whidbey Island.
- In Bill Siverly's "Lownsdale Square," the elements of the place carry the meaning: a monument to soldiers who died for a long-ago US overseas military venture, a fountain for ghost horses, a bronze statue of an elk "where real elk once grazed," people engaged in civic duties and preacher shouting "You're guilty as sin!" All these elements of the place create the statement the poem makes about Oregonians dying in today's US overseas venture. Without these elements of a particular place, there would be no poem.

Even in poems of place set in the natural world, human concerns typically take center stage, entwining themselves with the particular locales in which the action unfolds so that place and idea become inextricably linked. Robert Frost, great American poet of rural nature, said near the end of his career that he'd written only two poems

without a human being in them. In this issue of *Windfall*, a number of poems also use particular locales in the natural world to explore human concerns:

- In J. Ramsey Golden's "First Memory," the physical landscape at Anaktuvuk Pass presents an image of the relationship between the speaker and her father as they walk on the snow: The tundra is white paper, their tracks are like a pen's indentations in the paper, and the tall father is a capital "I" while the four-year-old speaker is a comma—but the lack of black ink in the indentations betrays the silence or lack of communication between them.
- Montana's Flathead Lake provides the concrete images and language for Richard Robbins' description of a sexual dalliance five miles from shore: tree, squall, bark, gust and grit, hills, fish-silver. The size of Flathead Lake itself—the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi—provides the necessary privacy. Afterwards, the spirit of the place seems to reinforce the speaker's intense postcoital worldview: the lake's blue water is "so deep those mountains could drown in it," "so jammed with trout it glittered like a cloud full of glass." The blue (not the lake, not the water, but the predominant quality of the place) seems to engage in sex as well; just as the "she" of the poem has taken the speaker's "thirsty tree" inside her, the blue
took mountain, took cloud and boat,
took two people trying to become

a lake, took all things under high sun
into itself.

We receive many submissions to *Windfall* which fail to make "place" a significant element of the poem. Some of these poems remain placeless, primarily mental exercises. Other poems present a generic place—a lake, a beach, a mountain, a meadow. Such "places" are more conceptual than actual; they ask the reader to conjure up the concept of "mountain" or "lake," rather than creating for the reader the experience

of a unique, actual place. “Mountain” or “lake” often conjures up no more than a cliché, and those clichés, in our opinion, get in the way of our understanding actual places. Generic settings often occur in poems which use “place” metaphorically while the true concern has nothing to do with action occurring in a real place. Other poems add a real place as an overlay to an agenda which has nothing to do with the particular locale; there’s no entanglement of meaning; the place is only a name put onto the poem. These poems—of no place, or generic place, or overlaid place—are often otherwise fine poems, but they’re not what *Windfall* is about.

Much of canonical English-language poetry is rooted in specific places, without which the poems lose some of their meaning and all of their flavor. William Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge September 3, 1802,” describes a still-sleeping London shortly after dawn and before breakfast fires are lit throughout the city so that “ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples” stand “bright and glittering in the smokeless air.” The particulars of place function as evidence for the overall idea of the poem, that a city whose inhabitants are immobilized in sleep can be as wonderful as “valley, rock, or hill.” Much of Walt Whitman’s poetry uses the omnibuses, ferry boats, and public life of Manhattan and Brooklyn to develop and declaim his ideas of life. Longfellow takes us to the Jewish Cemetery at Newport, the Boston of Paul Revere, the Lake Superior of Hiawatha, the Nova Scotia of the Acadians. In one of his better sonnets, Longfellow uses the geological oddities of a particular mountain fifteen miles south of what is now Vail, Colorado, as a vehicle to describe his feelings eighteen years after his wife burned to death. When her dress had caught fire, he had grabbed her to try to put the fire out and was severely burned, disfiguring his face so much that he grew a beard to cover the scars. After many years of what from all accounts had been an exceptionally happy marriage, Longfellow was devastated. The mountain “in the distant West” whose side “sun-defying, in its deep ravines / Displays a cross of snow” year-round parallels Longfellow, who says, “Such is the cross I wear upon my breast,” matching ravines with scars, unmelting

snow with eighteen years of grief, a particular, real mountain with a specific living human being.

Lawrence Buell says that “place” means “space” which has been given meaning, distinctness, and value. As poets and editors who value place, we’re looking for poetry which explores and develops ever richer meanings of the places of importance to us. As children, Paul Shepard says, our experience of particular environments is part of what forms our identity, our very sense of self: “Terrain is analogous to the self,” he says. We’re looking for poetry which binds a writer’s concerns, personal or cosmic, with a writer’s places, both built-world and green-world terrains.

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Works referred to in this afterword:

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