Afterword

Global Warming and the Poetry of Place

As we complete our sixth year of *Windfall*, we can't help but note that we have received few poems about global warming—arguably the most monumental crisis facing humanity. We would imagine that poetry of place would serve as a ready vehicle in which to register effects of climate change on human lifeways.

Since many of these effects lie in the future, poetry, because it so often focuses on the present moment or the past, is perhaps not prepared to look ahead. Maybe, as poets, we draw inspiration and imagery primarily from direct experience—and climate change may not yet have registered in our daily lives in terms sufficiently here-and-now to emerge in our poetry. Maybe consideration of life under climate change lends itself more to analytical prose than to the imagery and emotional complexes of poetry.

On the other hand, when we started this magazine, we began with an assumption that an emphasis on poetry of place would naturally lead to increased environmental awareness, including considerations of the changes poets have witnessed in places where they live, work, and explore. Poets are usually close observers with acute awareness of how things can be conveyed in language. Surely, we thought, even casual evidence of global warming would be registered and perhaps extrapolated into the future. Poets, those antennae of the race, would be the first to express awareness of this important change. In the meantime, especially over the last year or so, discussion of global warming has become common in the popular press, in books of environmental science, in songs, in documentary films, and in election campaigns. The subject has even attracted the Nobel Peace Prize (for Al Gore and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Where are the missing poems? And what new perspectives could they bring?

Maybe we need to consider what such poetry might look like, a general idea. In the afterword "Peak Oil and the Poetry of Place" of our

fall 2005 issue, we tried to draw attention to one aspect of the future. When the availability of such a cheap, flexible and plentiful source of energy such as oil enters steep decline, many aspects of culture will be affected. As James Kunstler says:

> It is no exaggeration to state that reliable supplies of cheap oil and natural gas underlie everything we identify as a benefit of modern life. All the necessities, comforts, luxuries, and miracles of our time—central heating, air conditioning, cars, airplanes, electric lighting, cheap clothing, recorded music, movies, supermarkets, power tools, hip replacement surgery, the national defense, you name it—owe their origins or continued existence in one way or another to cheap fossil fuel.

More fundamentally, as Kunstler also says, cheap fossil fuel underlies agriculture, and hence makes possible (by means of "green revolutions") population increase that exceeds sustainability. As petroleum and natural gas—which drive farm operations and provide chemical fertilizers—become scarce over the next thirty years, we at *Windfall* could foresee that more of us will be involved in the production of food in closer-knit communities. We reviewed the kind of past and present poetry that focused on raising food, from Virgil to Wendell Berry, in order to get a glimpse of the likely future.

Richard Heinberg predicts that the decline of oil may coincide with other conditions, such as global warming, resource depletion, overpopulation, declining food production, political instability, and economic contraction, to create a "perfect storm" of calamity for human beings. The outcomes, unquestionably dire, threatening the continuity of civilization itself, may also lead to new bioregional cultures that will adapt to new conditions—or adapt to conditions that existed previous to the fossil-fuel-based modernity that we have exploited for two hundred years. While the end of oil may lead to changes that are materially predictable, such as a return to community-scale agriculture, the consequences of global warming are somewhat less explicit, the

material outcomes less accessible to sensual imagination. As poets, how can we observe the effects of global warming in our lives? How can we extrapolate from these effects?

Contemporary Olympic Peninsula poet Tom Jay addresses the past and the present of our condition in his poem "Crossing Hood Canal Bridge":

> They learned late, the farmers,
> the loggers, the highway builders.
> Men who gloried in their youthful
> strength and saw too late the ruined
> forest, the barren ground, the preposterous
> roads. It is a bitter old age for
> them, tuneless and grim. They know
> they ruined the bell they rang
> so fiercely.

Though pessimistic about the outcome of their destructive activities, Jay shows a certain empathy with the fate of the farmers, loggers, and highway builders. But the Norwegian poet Rolf Jacobsen (1907-1994) does not hear Jay's "ruined bell" in our condition. Rather, he sees life prevailing even amid the detritus of civilization, which is conveyed in general images in this poem (published in 1969):

> But We Live—
> —But we live
> Through supermarkets and racks full of cheese, and we live
> under the vapor trails of jets in the golden month of May
> and in smoke-dimmed cities,
> and we live with coughing carburetors and slamming car doors.
> We live
> through the TV-evening in our golden century,

on asphalt, behind tabloids and at gas stations.
We live
As statistics and as registration numbers in election years.
We live with a flower in the window,
in spite of everything we live under
hydrogen bombs the threats
of nuclear extermination, sleep-
less we live
side by side with the hungry who
die by the millions, live
with a weariness to our thoughts, live
still, live
magically inexplicably live,
live
on a star.

—translated by Robert Hedin

The images in this poem—supermarkets, vapor trails, smoke-dimmed cities, coughing carburetors, slamming car doors, asphalt, tabloids, gas stations—we call "general" because they are not attached to a specific place or unique occasion. They are drawn from modernity in general, nowhere in particular. In the following poem Jacobsen presents images more specifically drawn from a place, such as we hope for at *Windfall*—in this case Avaldsnes (ä'-väls-nyes), a headland on the island of Karmøy on the west coast of Norway, site of medieval St. Olaf's church. Yggdrasil (ig'-dra-sil) in Norse mythology is the (ash) tree of the universe.

AVALDSNES
Old stone towers at nightfall
can resemble the stumps of giant trees.
We came to Avaldsnes one evening and saw
an old church grow dark on its hill,

woven into a white veil of mist: a granite clump
that looked like the root of a tree,
a mighty oak or ash that once loomed here
with birdsong and with branches spread out
above a rugged, mysterious land.
Perhaps an Yggdrasil, perhaps a tougher tree,
blown down in the wind of the ages
when the branches got too heavy
and the storm perhaps too severe;
but where did the birds fly off to,
what became of their songs,
can you tell me that?

—translated by Roger Greenwald

Jacobsen here is not referring specifically to global warming, and instead speaks of the "wind of the ages" as the destroying force that blows down the great tree, the root of which the stone church resembles. Jacobsen draws upon the imagery of a specific place to evoke a power that remains mysterious, effacing even birdsong. With the poet we are brought up short by the question of what became of that birdsong. As the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam wondered in the midst of a different desolation, "Is that why crates of charm / are stored in empty space?" Mandelstam believed that all poets write to a future reader, as if putting a note in a bottle for an unknown interlocutor to receive on a distant shore. According to him, addressing such an interlocutor is what gives verse wings, air, flight. Much of his own poetry maintains such flight, even in the most oppressive reality, his internal exile in the "gulag archipelago" of the Soviet Union in 1937.

We understand the term "global warming" to mean the rapid overall warming of the planet because of an increase in the production of greenhouse gasses by human activity. Global warming may in turn lead to climate change in regions, in terms of temperature, humidity, precipitation, wind, and severity of weather events. Many

of these effects, or the leading edges of them, can be observed today, depending on where one lives. Poets in Alaska and northern Canada live where melting glaciers and thawing tundra are evident, as well as threatened habitat for humans and animals. Indeed, the north is where global warming is making itself known early and dramatically in its development. Surely the imagery is at hand that will enlarge the perception and emotional understanding of us all. When robins appear in places where there has been no native word for "robin," global warming has arrived.

Further south, the *Windfall* bioregion (which we define as the north coast of Alaska to the Bay Area, and the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast) has experienced increasingly damaging weather events, such as the severe storms and flooding of the winters 2006-2007 and 2007-2008, especially along the Pacific Coast and inland. In this issue of *Windfall* poet Lisa D. Schmidt in her poem, "Carnelian in Adna," responds to this year's severe flooding of the Chehalis River at Adna, Washington.

Tim Flannery, citing the work of Camille Parmesan and Gary Yohe, writes: "[Since 1950] right around the globe, a strong pattern has emerged. This manifests itself as a poleward shift in species' distribution of, on average, 4 miles per decade, a retreat up mountainsides of 20 feet per decade, and an advance of spring activity of 2.3 days per decade." Gardeners have noticed that in recent years spring comes earlier and summer lasts longer. One poet, Judith Barrington, has drawn upon this effect in a poem that appeared in the spring 2004 issue of *Windfall:*

> Global Warming
> Almost Hallowe'en and no rain yet.
> Yellow leaves spotted brown like an old hand
> clog the creek, congregate at the bend,
> pile against rocks which long for a break in the heat.
> Too long their dented gray pates have baked
> in morning sun. Too long the dipper has landed
> on rocks, curtseyed to the maples that handed
> her crisp bouquets. Twigs float in her wake.

Somewhere downstream, salmon grow anxious,
nosing into the current, ready and fertile.
I watch in vain for the first thrashings under the bank—
What if there's no rain by Christmas?
What shall we do then—the fish grown prehensile,
boulders sighing for the touch of a silver flank?

Barrington has appropriately read weather changes caused by global warming in terms of salmon, one of the bioregion's great indicator species. It's hard to imagine no rain by Christmas—but maybe, someday. In 2007, after months of dry weather, rain did not arrive in Portland until September 28—and then it came in a deluge—on what proved to be the rainiest day of the year. Such weather swings are typically predicted for global warming, which can bring not only higher temperatures and drought, but also more rain and snow.

One of the dire effects of global warming is the increased number of extinctions due to the inability of plants and animals to adapt to rapidly changing climate and habitat. Something of this is implied in Lara Gularte's poem "Sandhill Cranes at Lundgren's Rice Farm," in this issue of *Windfall*. As the cranes rise from the field, "Behind them the wetlands grow vague. / Suddenly they slip / beyond this world."

Another poem on global warming, by Shelley Kirk-Rudeen of Olympia, Washington, appeared in the fall 2006 issue of *Windfall*. Zumwalt Prairie is located in eastern Oregon near the Imnaha River, and much of it is a grassland preserve of the Nature Conservancy:

Zumwalt Prairie
The shadows of clouds race northward.
Above the shush of wind in pine and grass,
listen: timbers groaning,
the ark creaking to life.

This will be no gathering of two by two.
There will be no one place to call home.

Everything on the move, leaving
to become native to new places
as the old homes change,

traveling by windblown seed, by wing,
by cloven hoof and padded foot,
in bellies and in dung, in water's flow.

And what of the ones who travel
by rhizome's reach,
by the exquisite slowness of slime trail?

And what of the ones who must stay?
Is it only their names we will carry forward?

Kirk-Rudeen presents the notion that animals and plants "travel" to compensate for global warming, which they do, though some are slower (rhizomes and snails), and some can't move at all—a negative version of Noah's ark. The shock that global warming, usually thought to be "decades in the future," could suddenly outstrip the capacity to respond is brought home. Both "Global Warming" and "Zumwalt Prairie" end in questions, as if leaving the fate of salmon and other species to the imaginations of readers. More ominously, poet Mary Oliver writes, "There are so many small bodies in the world, / for which I am afraid."

Obviously global warming can have serious consequences for humans and the plant and animal species that have evolved together with them. Putting forth a worse-case scenario, James Lovelock assumes that if we continue producing carbon dioxide at the current rate, CO_2 will rise from the current 380 parts per million to 500 parts per million or more, billions will die, and humanity will be reduced to a remnant living in the Arctic, ruled by warlords. Tim Flannery says, "If humans pursue a business-as-usual course for the first half of this century, I believe the collapse of civilization due to climate change becomes inevitable."

Whether humans can do anything to slow global warming remains uncertain, though a good deal of thought, writing and legislation will go into the project to attempt to reduce fossil fuel burning and the output of greenhouse gasses. Poetry can have a part to play in this by sounding a warning and witnessing failure and success.

However, Flannery, more optimistic than Lovelock, says, "Humanity, of course, would survive such a collapse, for people will persist in smaller, more robust communities such as villages and farms…." Some thinking has already passed beyond amelioration of global warming into the realm of figuring out how to cope with the consequences of it. Some of this thinking takes on a "survivalist" tinge (stockpile food and ammo!), focusing on living without oil and many other amenities we have grown accustomed to. Some take the recent experience of the breakdown of economic society in the former Soviet Union as instructive in the ways of barter (soap as currency) and self-sufficiency, including the critical importance of backyard gardens. Poets who are gardeners have much to say about the mindfulness of cultivation, both urban and rural, that leads to "robust communities."

One of the most rewarding of global warming writers is Richard Heinberg, who is no catastrophic survivalist, but in his books he does try to imagine a future of "powerdown," by which he means "a species-wide effort toward self-limitation." He assumes the limitation not only of energy use, but of population growth and material goals. Community interdependence would replace wasteful individualism. Life would become local in every respect. Some of these parameters would take us back to a previous time in history, when they were imposed by premodern conditions. As Lewis Mumford pointed out, the period 1000-1750 in Europe ran almost entirely on wind and water power, augmented by animal power. Surely humans would not abandon the best of technology as we choose self-limitation. Wind and solar power, for instance, would be technologies that the dwindling supply of oil might be best used to develop and sustain.

If the future is implicit in the past and present, how might the world look to our children and grandchildren? How do we draw upon

emotional and spiritual resources to provide sustenance to present and future readers? Certainly not by hectoring and despair. Not by assuming an apocalypse of human conflict and decline (we have plenty of that from novels like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and many dystopian films). Rather, let us discover the poetry that begins where Shelley's "Ozymandias" ends, after the Empire has collapsed, the poetry that explores human opportunity to make a new cooperative life on a simpler and smaller scale.

We might look forward to a restoration of the "economy of the gift" that Lewis Hyde maintains is essential for any art to flourish. Poetry will likely rely more upon orality than paper or mechanical means for transmission. To facilitate memory and delivery, oral poetry (as distinguished from "performance poetry") has always tended toward parallel structures in lines and stanzas. Poetry will have to be "memorable" in content as well. It will most likely be local, understood in terms of *where* it comes from. These are the outlines of the kind of poetry we are encouraging and looking for at *Windfall*. When *Windfall* the magazine has long gone to the great recycler in the earth, the kind of poetry it has embodied will continue through the mouths of its descendants.

Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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