

Poetry of Witness in the Northwest

Many poems that we publish in *Windfall* celebrate the natural world, especially in unpeopled, relatively wild areas. It's important to draw attention to these areas for a variety of reasons—because we need to express gratitude for the wonderful planet we inhabit, and we need to teach about places that might be damaged if no one is paying attention to them. And, most importantly, an intact natural world is the *sine qua non* for our very existence. Those of us with the financial resources, good health, free time, and geographic good luck to be able to go into the green world regularly need to continue to write poems of wild nature.

Much of the natural world has also been damaged, destroyed, or altered beyond recognition. As Bill McKibben shows in *The End of Nature*, every place in the world has been affected in some way by humans, often adversely. Even on the remotest mountaintop, the air is no longer “natural” but carries a human-produced burden of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and chlorofluorocarbons. The fatty tissue of wild animals carries residue of our pesticides, and millions of pounds of plastic trash float in the oceans. The damage that's been done to places needs exposure, explanation, what Carolyn Forché calls the “poetry of witness.” To be silent in the face of the often unwitting depredation of the “last good places” is to enable further damage.

We might begin with the “wild places”—many of which were not “wild” until the federal government mandated the removal of the original inhabitants. A knowledge of the history of a place helps create a more accurate perspective. For instance, David Hedges' “Spencer's Rock” in an earlier issue of *Windfall* lets “old Spencer” tell of his family's fishing at Klickitat Falls for generations past, making more complex what might have been perceived as a scenic falls:

“My brother drowned here last year.

He was seventy. Fall in, that's it."
He leans from the rickety platform,
The taut rope girdling his waist
Tied to an iron ring pounded
Into rounded gray bedrock above.

Near the end of the poem, old Spencer looks to the future, with a knowledge of the legal situation:

The old man
points to the concrete walls and wrought-iron grates
built into a channel blasted through basalt.
"This fish ladder was placed here by the state.
It filled with gravel and they left it.
They said Klickitat Falls was in tribal hands.
Their own law says, if they don't maintain it,
in five years it's part of the land.
For seventy years, no one gave it a thought.
Now it's their excuse to blow the place apart.
Spencer's Rock, the works."

More than alteration of a natural landscape is at stake here. Local knowledge is being blown apart, and with it, the place-based identities of those who lived there for generations. The degradation of the physical landscape which fish, animals, and plants depend upon is a concern, but so too is the accompanying loss of spiritual qualities and other cultural values embedded in a particular place. Displacement of long-time inhabitants, particularly indigenous peoples, leads to a loss of practical knowledge of a place—how to live in it well, how humans can best relate to a specific landscape to allow both people and the land to flourish.

On a broader scale, we lose our deep history as we lose our natural landscapes. For many centuries, salmon defined the Pacific Northwest. But the completion of Bonneville Dam in 1937—and then Grand Coulee, Chief Joseph, The Dalles, McNary, John Day, and other salmon-unfriendly dams—redefined the Northwest in terms of cheap electric power, ushering in not only agribusiness for previously arid

land, but also aluminum smelters, Boeing, and accelerated industrial development. And what was lost? Many miles of natural landforms, including, for instance, the Cascades of the Columbia, whose rapids turned the river's surface "for several hundred yards, as white as a field of snow," as one immigrant of 1843 wrote. The structures and warm lake stretching upriver from Bonneville Dam obscure the local landscapes that hold the history of the area, recounted in Bill Siverly's poem "Columbia Cascades" in *Clearwater Way*: the portaging of the boats around the rapids; the interactions of the Cascades Indians with Lewis and Clark, missionaries, fur traders and settlers; the 1855 treaties that took the land of the Yakamas, Klickitats, and Cascades; the grief-stricken and angry Indians' attacks on the settlers' town; the Indian hangings that followed; the two new forts that asserted Anglo dominance. The places of these events along the former rapids have been submerged or bulldozed beyond recognition, and with the loss of these places we have lost part of our history, part of who we all are. We need poems that see the multiple layers of landscape and meaning. Throughout the Northwest, logging, mining, and damming of rivers have left not only physical scars but also psychological, spiritual, and cultural scars that poems could address.

Some areas have simply been written off—the brownfields, Superfund sites, and "sacrifice zones" where we've pursued our industrial goals and contaminated the land. We escape to the green world to avoid such areas, leaving them to the poor and the working class, whose livelihoods and affordable residences often touch on them. These areas—often on the banks of bays, estuaries, and rivers—embarrass us; they enable our affluent lives, and undercut our professed values of respect for the earth.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, poets have been writing about the ravaging of particular places for the sake of industrial production. William Blake laments the changes in "London" when he says,

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,

And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

The streets been “chartered”—bounded, defined, and contracted for private use by those in power, akin to the enclosure of common lands throughout England at the time—and the river Thames as well has been appropriated, its banks artificially bounded in stone and its course altered by the government before Blake’s time.

In a similar vein, Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz has written many poems as part of his fight back against military and industrial taking and misuse of Indian lands in the Southwest. With humor and an acerbic bite, he tells the stories of the loss of gardens, fields, clean water, and health. And each telling lets us see how it is that these misdeeds come to be, as in this poem of a job with processed uranium:

In Yellowcake,
we packed the processed stuff
which is a yellow powder
into fifty-five gallon drums
and wheeled them out
to waiting trucks
bound for where we didn’t know.

Once,
thinking I knew something,
I told Wiley
that the government used
the yellowcake for bombs
and reactors and experiments.

Wiley studied my face a minute,
then he spat on the ground
and said, “Once, I worked
in a chicken factory.
We plucked and processed chickens
so people could eat ’em.

I don't know what the hell else
you could do with them."

—"Stuff: Chickens and Bombs"

In another poem, Ortiz recalls the 1969 burning of the Cuyahoga River in Ohio, beginning with the most earth-bound common sense:

I will tell my son over and over again,

"Do not let the rivers burn."

—"Burning River"

Sometimes we need such simple reminders of how to behave, and of who else the earth belongs to. On the occasion of a 2007 oil spill in San Francisco Bay, Daniel Marlin says in an earlier issue of *Windfall* that someone should warn the birds who would be landing on the water of the bay, telling them, "Fly on beyond this / place of your ancient landing, / fly on."

Many events and places deserve such poems of witness. Portland alone has fifteen heavily toxic Superfund sites, including eleven miles of the Willamette River known as "Portland Harbor," which most residents remain unaware of. Since the clean-up of the river in the 1970s, most Portlanders have seen the Willamette as a beautiful river, a place for dragonboats, canoes, jetskis, fishing, and photography. The EPA, on the other hand, explains that the river remains contaminated with metals, including mercury, as well as with pesticides, herbicides, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, polychlorinated biphenyls, semi-volatile organics, and dioxin. A century of industrial pollutants, sewage, and other poisons have entered the river and settled on the banks and river bottom. In 1905, what is now part of the Superfund site hosted the gracious pavilions and halls of the international Lewis and Clark Exposition, centered around the picturesque 250-acre Guild's Lake. The lake was part of a 400-acre marsh which harbored thousands of birds, provided refuge for fish, and rose and fell with the level of the adjacent Willamette. Who will speak a word for these transformed places?

We might also note the ongoing transformation of real, quirky places into "non-places," courtesy of transnational corporations. Over the course of settlement of the North American continent, newcomers have

always changed the meaning of landscapes they found. Geographer David Harvey describes the process, explaining that “the world’s spaces were deterritorialized, stripped of their preceding significations, and then reterritorialized according to the convenience of colonial and imperial administration.” The process has been accelerated by vigorous industrial capitalism, with the result that today we live much of our lives in settings that have utterly no connection to place—offices, malls, franchised restaurants, chain theatres and chain hotels, airports, and hospitals that strive to be uniform and uninfluenced by place. Perhaps we sometimes need relief from newness or strangeness that neutral, predictable, interchangeable places can provide. But for long term, day-to-day living, a connection to specific places seems an essential strategy for sanity and health. We might consider the idea of “non-places” in order to see our still-existing places more clearly: What do companies strip away from a place to turn it into a non-place? These are the elements we need to value and name, and by naming them, keep them in existence—if not in the landscape, then at least in the poetry. Vincent Wixon’s “Rust” in this issue demonstrates one way to do it:

Driving to Home Depot for hinges, I pass
an old pear orchard behind the Peterbilt
Sales and Service. The trees still produce,
or those acres would anchor the new La-Z-Boy
superstore a quarter mile on.

.....

The pear orchard’s twisted,
black trunks and rust-colored branches will bear
for a few more years, then give way to a big box—
what it’s zoned for.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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