Afterword

Poetry of Place as Sanctuary

In the months after the failure of the Copenhagen Climate Conference in December 2009, we at *Windfall* are worried—as many of you reading this must be—about the fate of the earth and our human fate so intimately tied to it. Apparently most people cannot bring themselves to commit to the kinds of changes required to avert climate disaster—and this apparently because they can no longer identify with the natural world to the extent required. We are not alone in our apprehension. In the last century thinkers and artists became aware that the human condition had undergone a dramatic change which left the individual isolated from the natural context that had prevailed for the duration of human evolution. Toward the end of his life in 1959, Carl Jung, one of the founders of psychology, summarized our condition this way:

> As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional "unconscious identity" with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications. Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain cave the home of a great demon. No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied. (95)

Earlier still, in 1921 Rainier Maria Rilke wrote the last five of his ten *Duino Elegies*, among them the "Ninth Elegy," which includes the following passage:

Und diese, von Hingang
lebenden Dinge verstehn, daß du sie rühmst; vergänglich,
traun sie ein Rettendes uns, den Vergänglichsten, zu.
Wollen, wir sollen sie ganz im unsichtbarn Herzen
verwandeln
in—o unendlich—in uns! Wer wir am Ende auch seien.

And these things—thriving on the passing of things—
They understand that you praise them; transient, they
Trust us—us, the most transient of all—to rescue them.
They compel us to transform them entirely in the invisible
heart,
Oh infinitely—into us! Whoever we may finally be.
(translation by Jutta Donath and Bill Siverly)

In his commentary on this and related passages in the *Duino Elegies*, Robert Pogue Harrison says:

> Rilke . . . believed that he belonged to an age when the "visible earth" was falling away, slipping into oblivion, giving way to a new order of "virtual" reality, an age when an entire mode of being that rested on humic foundations was being uprooted by forces that swept away the old in order to usher in a paltry newness based on "action[s] without symbol[s]," replacing the old things with things we can no longer "live by" precisely because their connection with the earth has been severed. (49)

The kinds of "things" that Rilke considered to be falling into oblivion were listed by him in earlier lines of the "Ninth Elegy": "house, bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window—at most column, tower…." We who are reading his poem almost a century later know that much more than the items on this list—only items produced by humans had value for Rilke—are falling into oblivion. We are losing stable weather, clean water, uncrowded places, darkness at night and the stars that

darkness makes visible, too many plants and animals to count, and the cheap convenient energy of fossil fuels.

The "humic foundations" Harrison refers to are the biophysical conditions of life on earth that have prevailed throughout human history, closer to the natural phenomena that Jung refers to above. As those foundations are swept away, humanity substitutes a gimcrack reality, "things we can no longer live by." Ezra Pound, writing about the same time as Rilke, reckoned that "a tawdry cheapness / Shall outlast our days." In our own day, "virtual reality" refers to the computerized domain that Rilke could not have foreseen. But the entire commercial culture erected upon urbanization and modernity itself occupies more of our attention than the natural world upon which we depend.

Rilke in 1921 seemed prescient about the times that we are now living through, and he has more to say about our task as poets. Harrison says that Rilke believed, evident in the lines from the "Ninth Elegy" quoted above, that "It is not only the poet's task, but also the task of culture as a whole, to offer the earth and its perishing human past a saving sanctuary" (48). Rilke believed that the *utterable* (as opposed to the *unutterable*, which by definition lies beyond human ken) could provide a "mortal home" for things that were otherwise passing away. We transient poets, as makers of utterable art, will also make the last refuge of all that we utter. An utterable refuge demands imagery. If we are clear and accurate in our imagery, we might open awareness in readers of the true conditions of nature and culture.

One poet who has picked up this challenge is Donna Henderson, who lives near Monmouth, Oregon. In her 2009 book *The Eddy Fence,* we find poems that focus intimately and intensely upon the natural, largely rural world around her. In particular, the poem "The Sanctuary" constitutes a powerful instance of what Rilke is talking about in his "Ninth Elegy." She begins by evoking a situation across the road from where she lives: the clear-cutting of a forest that had always been there—an all too-common experience in the lives of many in the Northwest:

It was late when I walked up the gravel
road to the clear-cut hill. Loggers gone
for the day, feller-buncher machines all still,
their claws and blades cooling.
A low sun laid its thick light on the slope,
the light sieved through the last, lean stand.
Into those wrecked woods I walked,
straight to the center pile,
laid myself down on a log
and apologized for my species.

Mourning the loss of the trees and the solitude they had made possible, Henderson summarizes what has happened in terms reminiscent of Rilke:

For so long—oh, *forever*—I had counted on the forest's
persistence there, its green and cool surround.
Not to escape the sufferings of the world:
from which to bear them.
Now the violence was taking the forest too,
while I stood on my cedar deck,
inconsolable, seeing unceasingly.

The act of seeing leads Henderson to a larger realization, one that Rilke would surely recognize, one that holds implications for us all:

I saw inside. As the woods got small
the heart had to grow larger. To become,
by its breaking, what those woods had been.
Spacious, the heart would have to become,
and huge. Enough to hold all the trees
and their absence, and every other thing.

Henderson's statement that the heart, broken by the violence of clear-cutting, would have to become a sanctuary, large enough to hold a forest, its absence, and "every other thing," is an evocative echo of Rilke, posing his challenge to poets in contemporary terms in the context of the Pacific Northwest. We at *Windfall* would like to encourage poets to take up this call for poems.

How might this be achieved? Much remains to be discovered or created by poets unknown or yet to come. However, we can catch hints from poets we already know, such as Tim McNulty, who lives in the Olympic rain forest of Washington and whose work also lives there, as in his fine book of poems, *In Blue Mountain Dusk*. Part of the key is precise observation of the flora and fauna of one's experience in a particular place. Here McNulty observes a bird, the dipper, on the Dungeness River, a 32-mile long stream that begins in the Olympic Mountains:

> ONE FOR THE DIPPER
> (*Cinclus mexicánus*)
>
> To be as sure
> & light-footed among rapids
> as the dipper:
>
> slate-gray puff
> of feather & song
> twiglike yellow feet
>
> *dip, dip,* on a sudsing rock
> cheeps off upstream
> no higher than spray…
>
> one yesterday—
> drinking delicate little
> beakfuls

from a boulder
mid-Dungeness
wild with three-weeks' rain.

Though the poem seems to consist of a single sentence, it is in reality less importantly a full sentence than a series of fragments—which seems totally appropriate to the subject, that "slate-gray puff" that "cheeps" its light-footed way upstream, appearing and disappearing as dippers do, as the short lines of the poem do. The poem provides a refuge for the dipper to exist in, a wild Dungeness River of words with sudsing rocks, rapids and spray. The dipper itself is presented in characteristic detail. McNulty's exactitude is such that he provides the Latin name of the bird. McNulty has poems that provide in similar ways for elk and deer, and in his recent chapbook, *Some Ducks*, the title poem gives sanctuary to those birds too, with his daughter as witness.

Rarely does a poet commit to evoking through imagery some part of nature and leave it at that—leaving the human significance to the inferential powers of the reader. Most poems about nature are careful to place the human concerns carefully within the natural context, sometimes very briefly, as in this poem by Mary Oliver:

Cormorants
All afternoon the sea was a muddle of birds
black and spiky,
long-necked, slippery.

Down they went
into the waters for the poor
blunt-headed silver
they live on, for a little while.

God, how did it ever come to you to
invent Time?

I dream at night
Of the birds, of the beautiful, dark seas
They push through.

Here the natural world of the cormorants is sketched with utmost brevity: birds that are "black and spiky, / long-necked, slippery," and the diving they do for silver fish. However, parallel to the diving birds, the poet too "dives" into the unconscious world of dreams, with a question to God about time, which means mortality for both birds and humans (much of this volume of poems, *Thirst*, concerns the poet's response to the death of her partner). That is, Oliver lets the poem become a sanctuary for both cormorants and in parallel, the human soul.

These connections are also made explicit in Robert Wrigley's poem of a night scene on a porch in rural Idaho above the Clearwater River, where Wrigley lives. The poem is a sanctuary for birds and insects, as well as a bat and a cat, the poet and a boy:

Quiet Night
The bat's opened thorax blips
—that's its heart
beating, says the boy—and its mouth bites
at the air, and the cat
that brought it down sits two steps below
and preens, while the pale cone
shed by the porch light makes and remakes itself
with the shadows of miller, moth, and midge.
Listen, the darkness just under the stars
is threaded with passings:
nighthawks and goatsuckers, the sleepy respirations of the forest,
and the owl that asks first for a name,
then it leaves its spar
and spreads a silence
so vast and immobile

you can hear whole migrations inside it,
the swoons, the plummets, the bland ascensions
of souls.

Within a "quiet night" all sorts of things are "passing," predicated on the death of a single bat and culminating in the "the swoons, the plummets, the bland ascensions / of souls" in total silence. As Rilke notes in his "Ninth Elegy," we are the most transient of all things, yet we are charged with making the poems in which all transient things may find their being.

Barbara Drake's poem "Wet Land" offers a variation on the theme of sanctuary by focusing on the agricultural fields near her home in Yamhill County of Oregon when the "silver pools stand there in winter," common in the daily experience of many Northwesterners. The poem shows us the natural details (wapato and horse) of the place, while explaining *why* they are endangered:

Wet Land
Wapato is blooming this month, *Sagittaria latifolia*,
"a round root the size of Hens eggs,"
favored as food by native inhabitants of Oregon,
once abundant around here.
Driving north I pass a pond full of wapato
now blooming, the small white flowers
elevated on long stems
like spots of sunlight on shiny leaves.

Later, going south, I see the farmer
unloading drain pipe for the field at the curve.
It means he is going to put an end to the silver pools
that stand there in winter.
I know he is tired of farming,
wants to subdivide, build houses
at the bend of the road into town.

I feel a sigh of grief, thinking
I will no longer see that pond in winter.
The water will rush away
as if it were an unwelcome guest saving face,
pretending that it has somewhere
more important to go.

Once in the wapato marsh I saw a red mare
standing in water up to her chest. Her neck arched
As she pulled wet weeds with her mouth.
I never go past there without hoping
to see her again, to see the red horse
up to her broad chest, mouthing weeds.

The California poet Joseph Stroud spends his summers at his cabin on Shay Creek in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Here place becomes a sanctuary for bird and man, as they both inhabit the marvelous present captured by the poem:

In the Shining
I've got my chair and a good book and I'm sitting
out behind the cabin in a shaft of sunlight, reading.
A couple of Steller's jays who might be my friends
perch themselves on branches in the ponderosa
and sugar pine. They can't read the book I've got
but they can read me, and they watch very carefully
for that moment when my hand reaches in-
to my pocket and pulls out some crusts of bread
which I toss out over the forest floor and the jays
spring off the limbs and streak down in a blue blaze,
scoop the crusts and back in the limbs again
chortling. This is the way of my life these days—
lazing, serene, but not so indolent, not so torpid
that I won't get up now and then, grab my chair,

and move to another spot, over there by the cedar,
to that new place shining now in the sun.

We have to give up plundering the world. The preservation of our psyches may ultimately hinge on how we make sanctuary in ourselves for the natural world, raising the awareness of our readers. Jung thought we could introject gods into our selves, so why not introject the natural world after the manner of Rilke? However that may be, animals, plants, and even the rocks along the river await our utterance in order to have their full measure of being, as Rilke says, in us, the most transient of all. We welcome more such sanctuaries.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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