

## 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

44

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 mexicanus*)

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

**Works referred to in this afterword:**

Barbara Drake. "Wet Land." *Windfall* 5.1 (2006): 14. Reprinted in *Driving One Hundred*. Portland: Windfall Press, 2009. 56.

Robert Pogue Harrison. *The Dominion of the Dead*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Donna Henderson. "The Sanctuary." *The Eddy Fence*. Monmouth: Airlie Press, 2009. 19-20.

Carl G. Jung. "Approaching the Unconscious." *Man and His Symbols*. Ed. Carl G. Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz. Garden City: Doubleday, 1964. 18-103.

Tim McNulty. "One for the Dipper." *In Blue Mountain Dusk*. Seattle: Broken Moon Press, 1992. 31.

Tim McNulty. *Some Ducks: A Cycle of Poems for My Daughter*. New York: Pleasure Boat Studio, 2009.

Mary Oliver. "Cormorants." *Thirst*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006. 18.

Ezra Pound. "E. P. Ode Pour L' Election de Son Sepulchre." *Personæ: The Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions, 1926. 187-91.

Rainer Maria Rilke. "The Ninth Elegy." *Duino Elegies*. Bilingual Edition. Trans. Edward Snow. New York: North Point Press, 2000. 52-57.

Joseph Stroud. "Homage: Summer/Winter, Shay Creek." *Of This World: New and Selected Poems*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2009. 174-75.

Robert Wrigley. "Quiet Night." *Lives of the Animals*. New York: Penguin, 2003. 27.

