Afterword

Poetry of Place on a New Earth

In his new book *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet,* Bill McKibben presents evidence that the new world being brought about by global warming is not a worrisome problem for our children and grandchildren; it is here now. The old earth we've been so comfortable with over the 10,000 years of human civilization is no longer the earth we live on; with greatly increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere having already raised global temperatures a full degree Celsius, we're experiencing nature as it hasn't been since before the last ice age. Globally, the most immediate effect has come from the fact that warm air holds more water vapor than cold air. That means more water evaporating in dry regions, leading to increased drought and desertification, and more water coming down in wet regions, leading to downpours that start landslides and floods.

We're all familiar with the stories of global change: Glaciers are retreating and disappearing, the Arctic and Antarctic ice masses are melting; the oceans are becoming warmer and more acidic; coral reefs are dying; tropical diseases are spreading north and south of the tropics; bugs that used to die during the winter are surviving the milder winters and rebounding in spring in greater abundance than ever; plants and animals are dying in their customary regions and are migrating to more hospitable zones. Since the burning of fossil fuels has most likely been the largest contributor to the increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, most scientists and informed people (if not politicians and business leaders) realize that we must shift from fossil fuels to other sources of energy. At any rate, the availability of cheap oil is decreasing; the oil remaining underground is increasingly difficult and expensive and politically inexpedient to extract. No replacement for oil is likely, either, despite our wishes for some Manhattan Project to create a one. No renewable energy source—wind, solar, biofuel—matches the potency or dependability or versatility of oil. Nuclear

power is prohibitively expensive and uranium scarce—not to mention the dangers involved in mining the ore, running the reactors without accidents such as meltdowns, and safely storing the toxic nuclear waste for the next 10,000 to one million years. An abundant, inexpensive energy like oil is not in our future.

McKibben asks, "Does modernity disappear along with the oil?" He points out that six of the largest twelve companies in the world are fossil-fuel providers, and most of the global economy depends upon burning oil. Most of the food consumed in the industrialized world depends upon petrochemical fertilizers made mostly from oil. In *The Long Emergency* Jim Kunstler names some items in daily use that depend upon oil: televisions, computers, the Internet, phones, pharmaceuticals, plastics, fabrics, food (growing, refrigerating, transporting), and asphalt roads, among many other things. McKibben quotes Richard Heinberg: "Without petrochemicals, medical science, information technology, modern cityscapes, and countless other aspects of our modern technology-intensive lifestyles would simply not exist. In all, oil represents the essence of modern life." It would appear that much of what we think of as modernity will change immensely.

In such a changed world what will be important? What will the landscapes of our places look like? How will people live without fossil fuels? What will we need to know? Such questions might be starting points for poems that prepare us for the inevitable future.

Most people seem in denial about the changes that we are witnessing every day—right now, floods on an unprecedented level in Pakistan, a summer in which seventeen nations recorded their highest temperatures ever, and a July in which the world's oceans reached their highest temperature on record. It's so depressing to dwell on the changes to our earth that most people avoid thinking about them or taking action while action is still relatively easy. The greatest worry, as McKibben says, is that people give up in the face of such an increasingly difficult reality. Horace says that poetry is best when it's both *utile et dulce,* useful and pleasurable, or, as Sir Philip Sidney says, poetry should "teach and delight." Perhaps poetry is one of the better

ways to address the issues we're all facing. People turn to poetry in times of hardship—the breakup of a relationship, the death of a family member—so they may in the harder times likely to come. What poems would best address the newness of an altered world?

Poems might imagine how we will live everyday life without fossil fuels. The human race has existed for all but the last hundred and fifty years without fossil fuels; life without oil is actually the "normal" existence for humans, despite the recent past. But without oil, we will need to "catch up to the past"—we will need to learn what people have always known, but we've been allowed to forget—such as hands-on food-growing, clothes-making, and music-making. McKibben cites the idea that each barrel of oil equals about 25,000 hours of human labor, or about eleven years. And each year, the average American uses 25 barrels. Having so many servants at our beck and call has created a sense of entitlement. We're like antebellum slaveholders who refuse to consider a life without the privileges which we feel are rightfully ours. Dick Cheney stated our unwavering stance well: "The American way of life is not negotiable." Well, change is coming, and how well we handle it will be determined in part by how well we can imagine it now.

Much of the poetry of Paul Hunter, for instance, is about living on a farm that seems little changed since the early 1900s, before fossil fuels began to alter every aspect of life. In a world on the cusp of modernity, he continually shows an ambivalence about moving totally into modernity:

> Without a Word
> That last week of November
> some might cut off the electric
> fire up the woodstove
> light coal-oil lamps
> sit back breathe in
> a dim and flickering quiet
> talk more like prayer
> remind youngsters

what to be thankful about

but what of all the other
times a year some like Bill
never quite done with old ways
next day set to harvest
alfalfa clover timothy
without a word might take down
his scythe like a crookback old man
hung in the shed rafters safe

stroke with a stone till it's bright
shoulder and pace off
the corner of a field
a rough low spot where
the mower nearly always bottoms out
take a few long swipes
see does it fall and lay right
crescent swaths round his ankles
the doing rocked in its cradle
effortless no grim reaper
whispering swing low sweet chariot
reminders what had to be done
weeks on end
out of a hardscrabble youth

that he carries in offers to heifers
spilling a vast green armload
out of a whole other life.

Hunter shows two sets of choices, both optional at this point—a temporary and optional return to woodstove and kerosene lamp (neither of which most people have, and one of which still depends upon oil) and a return to nonmechanical harvesting. These are the "old

ways" which still have their attraction, enough to be kept alive. When our preferred choices become less available (electricity for everything, mechanical mowers), what are the alternatives? And who knows how to pursue them? Hunter's poems often present ways of living that circumvent the use of fossil fuels. In "Subsistence" someone whittles a cup out of a burl "to scoop and lift yourself a drink of water," and "in the days before indoor plumbing central heating electric / hot and cold running anything," there was more work and people may have smelled but "everyone knew and accepted." Rugs were still "rolled back for the dance."

Kunstler says in *The Long Emergency* that small towns may very well enjoy a resurgence as oil becomes too scarce and expensive for most people to use it. Some cities have been thinking along the lines of what life might be like without a dependence on oil-fueled transportation, creating, in effect, an urban area of many small towns. Portland's growth plans, for instance, promote the idea of "20-minute neighborhoods," encouraging, in effect, a return to the sort of urban neighborhoods that predominated until the 1920s when automobiles began to bring about changes in the landscape (such as the introduction, among other things, of parking lots, stoplight-controlled streets, corner gas stations, driveways in front of and between houses, multi-lane expressways where walkable streets had been, and, most of all, *distance* between all the places a person might want to go on a particular day). Portland defines a 20-minute neighborhood as a place where people can walk easily and safely from their homes to all the sorts of places and services needed in an average day—transit, school, good quality food, parks, shopping, and social activities. Where are the models for such neighborhoods? What do they feel like? Mary Lou Sanelli repeatedly captures small-town life in the Northwest. Here is the beginning of "Standing in Line at Aldrich's Grocery":

> On a summer morning,
> if sun casts its warmth without hesitation,
> we may chat up the likeliness

of tomatoes *actually* ripening
or how good it feels to sleep
with windows wide open
while curtains billow the air.

Or else
only a nod
relayed through the line
as we cup cups of coffee
sometimes nothing to say.

Other days, because we share so much: the same friend
whose marriage climbed, peaked, and severed.
The same children springing into the store at noon.
The same neighbor whose cancer rose
and spread like fluid between her limbs . . .
we *find* a reason
to air confusion, joy, amazement, fear—
especially fear . . . .

All is not sweetness and light, with the "severed" marriage and the cancer, but the benefits of community shine through this presentation of what Sanelli calls "our entangled lives." Every town has particular places where neighbors' paths cross, and each such place might provide abundant poems.

More than anything, a life without cheap oil and all it provides will require a change in attitudes. For a country defined by westward movement and travel and automobiles—where one of every six jobs is related to the automative industry—one of the hardest changes might be staying home and learning to appreciate the place where we live. Scott Russell Sanders explores such issues in his *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*. He suggests that the answer to many of our culture's ills might be brought about by, in effect, taking the gas out of our tanks. He directs our attention to Gary Snyder, whose analysis of

the problem in 1977 still holds:

> One of the key problems in American society now, it seems to me, is people's lack of commitment to any given place—which, again, is totally unnatural and outside of history. Neighborhoods are allowed to deteriorate, landscapes are allowed to be strip-mined, because there is nobody who will live there and take responsibility; they'll just move on. The reconstruction of a people and of a life in the United States depends in part on people, neighborhood by neighborhood, county by county, deciding to stick it out and make it work where they are, rather than flee.

And so we look for poems that might present the idea of staying put in a positive light. Wendell Berry's poetry offers many examples of the pleasures of settling in one spot long-term. He's most frank in "Stay Home" (a response to Robert Frost's invitation that "You come too" in his "The Pasture"):

> I will wait here in the fields
> to see how well the rain
> brings on the grass.
> In the labor of the fields
> longer than a man's life
> I am at home. Don't come with me.
> You stay home too.
>
> I will be standing in the woods
> where the old trees
> move only with the wind
> and then with gravity.
> In the stillness of the trees
> I am at home. Don't come with me.
> You stay home too.

Many poets have rendered their home places so well that it's hard to imagine them as free-floatingly abstract as poets of no place sometimes seem. Robert Frost in New England, Robinson Jeffers in Big Sur, Richard Hugo in the Northwest, Wendell Berry in Kentucky, Mary Oliver on the Massachusetts coast, Ted Kooser in Nebraska—each makes place inseparable from activity and thought. Thoreau says that from his doorstep, "Two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see." The landscape within a radius of ten miles of home, "or the limits of an afternoon walk," will never become quite familiar, he says, in our three score and ten years of life.

Walking, after all, is one of the most likely activities people will be pursuing more of in a post-oil world. It doesn't take much reading in literature of any time before the dominance of cheap oil to see the prevalence of walking. In *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, Mr. Earnshaw, "the old master," walks sixty miles to Liverpool and sixty miles back carrying the young Heathcliff in his arms. Or, in *The Three Musketeers*, even at the peaks of action when speed is of the essence, Athos and Porthos and Aramis and D'Artagnan walk and run between the houses of Paris where the events are occurring. Poets are always out walking and encountering life—Frank O'Hara on New York sidewalks, Robert Frost on forest paths or walking out in the rain and beyond the furthest city light to acquaint himself with the night, Mary Oliver in the woods of Cape Cod, Bashō on the narrow road to the deep north of Japan.

In 1981 Jim Dodge and others published a "bioregional quiz" in Stewart Brand's *CoEvolution Quarterly*. The frequently reprinted "Where You At?" quiz emphasizes how little most people actually know about the place where they live. The quiz calls for knowledge that for most of the history of the human race has been essential for our survival: "Name 5 edible plants in your region and their season(s) of availability," and "What were the primary subsistence techniques of the culture that lived in your area before you?" and "From what direction do winter storms generally come in your region?" Other questions call for knowledge of essential processes that we typically leave for others to know: "Trace

the water you drink from precipitation to tap," and "Where does your garbage go?"

Most city-dwellers encountering the quiz for the first time feel mildly embarrassed at knowing few of the answers ("Name five resident and five migratory birds in your area." "What are the major plant associations in your region?") and see no reason why anyone other than farmers or scientists should worry about knowing the answers. ("How long is the growing season where you live?" "What was the total rainfall in your area last year?") Attitudes soon change, though, when discussion turns to who benefits from our remaining ignorant of the answers—answers which, until around two hundred years ago, nearly every adult human, schooled and unschooled, knew. Our lack of understanding of the importance of the questions and willful ignorance of the answers enable businesses and government agencies to engage in public-health-threatening and earth-endangering practices. Only those who pay attention to the details of life in their home landscapes are likely to connect the dots among disposal of toxins, protection of drinking water, cultivation of appropriate plants, and health of indigenous species.

The poverty of knowledge about where we live leads to a thinness in poetry, a placelessness or generic placeness that implies that all locales are basically the same, and all that matters is human activity and emotion. At *Windfall*, we think otherwise. Every place has its own genius loci, its own flavor, its own prevailing atmosphere, as well as its own various histories—social, political, geological, meteorological, botanical. These elements of place to some extent influence what happens in the place, and in a poem they can provide a richness and depth and series of parallels that a poem couldn't otherwise achieve. As everyplace undergoes the effects of climate change, close attention is even more important.

Paulann Petersen provides an example of how attuned to home a place-knowledgeable poet can be with every sense engaged in her "Carried from the Current" in a previous issue of *Windfall*:

My house near the Willamette
is only blocks from that river,
yet the sound of its rise and fall, its steady
on-going to the Columbia, to the Pacific,
doesn't loft into air and carry this far.

Cars coming across the narrow
lamp-lit bridge arcing its surface—
they lay down a schussh I catch.
Geese that fly from its edges
to neighborhood ponds and parks
wrinkle the air with their calls.
Raccoons making dens on its near bank
rustle in my garden at night. With eyes lit up
for garter snakes, they thresh flowers,
then tidy up, washing their hands
at the birdbath's edge.

A river's roam, that big sounding,
makes an under-rumble quieter yet—
an ocean-bound heartbeat
I press my ear earthward to hear.

These are the sorts of attention, knowledge, and embracing of a home place that will serve us well on our changing earth.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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