

Poetry of the Invisible Landscape

Most Northwest poets excel at describing the landscapes of the region, with its glaciated mountains and rain-forested coasts and brilliant rocky deserts. At *Windfall* we receive many excellent poems presenting original, evocative, memorable accounts of experiences in natural as well as built landscapes. Yet we occasionally run across poems with Northwest settings in which something seems missing. A poem may present the scene clearly enough in vivid and evocative language, but the poem exists only in the present moment. Many poems can be made into more substantial, more powerful, more accurate poems of place by presenting not only the visible landscape but also the “invisible landscape.”

In *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*, Kent Ryden suggests that a landscape does not become a “place” until it has acquired meaning in the mind of the speaker, through experience and use, or through stories of experiences from family and friends, over time. An outsider may see the same coast line, the same shore pines, the same waves breaking on the basaltic rocks and be moved by the grandeur of it, but see no particular significance in any of it beyond the moment’s feeling and have no stories associated with what’s being observed. People for whom that landscape is a “place” not only see the beach, pines, waves, and rocks, but also recollect some of their past interactions with those physical features and stories of others there. “For those who have developed a sense of place,” Ryden says, “it is as though there is an unseen layer of usage, memory, and significance—an invisible landscape, if you will, of imaginative landmarks—superimposed upon the geographical surface.”

That unseen layer typically holds a powerful emotional charge which can be tapped in a poem. The more experiences a writer has had with a place, the more it may have acquired a spiritual and philosophical aspect for the writer as well. Knowing some of the history of a place—

biological, social, geological, and political—can make the place even more significant. A poem may only imply a particular past experience or event, but writing from such a wealth of associations enables a poem to achieve much greater resonance—operating on the “principle of the iceberg,” as Hemingway says, with seven-eighths of what the writer knows underwater for every part that shows. We want to know of poets and all authors we read: Do they know what they’re talking about? Or are they just tourists here?

In this issue of *Windfall*, for instance, Robert Davies’ “Timber Weather” illustrates a superimposition of past associations onto the present reality of the small Coast Range community of Timber, Oregon. These days Timber has deer, a river that “changes from lead to gold,” and “thrushes, Swainson’s and hermit.” On Third Street, the speaker waves to Mrs. Wilcox and “Wayne comes down the hill.” The speaker considers he might see “the old Indian,” and maybe a cougar or heron. But by poem’s end we learn that what we’ve seen so far has been “the invisible landscape” which only the speaker and perhaps some other long-time residents can see; changes have occurred:

Third Street is Wilcox Road.
Wayne moved years ago.
Mrs. Wilcox is long dead.
The Indian’s one-room house
went with Ms. Wilcox’s.

We return, in the last stanza, to the “many miracles” of Timber, which turn out to be “my comrade winter wren,” whispering Douglas firs, the thrushes, and the river (not cougars or herons). Those images as they appear today might make a fine poem, but the layers of the past make them more important: The loss of Third Street, Wayne, Mrs. Wilcox, and the Indian make the wren, fir, thrushes, and river more welcome, and more miraculous for their continued existence. Indeed, one of the values of place-based writing is the stability and dependability that it offers in a continually changing world.

Some poems of place lose potential because they focus so exclusively on the landscape and not on the invisible elements that make the landscape a “place.” The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines *place* as “a center of meaning constructed by experience.” The experience needn’t have been the writer’s. And the experiences needn’t have been remarkable. The experiences that create a sense of place, Tuan says, are “mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one’s muscles and bones.” Incorporating these elements into a poem give the poem its authenticity, its sense that the author has the authority to speak. This sense of “day after day” repetition giving the speaker authority comes across clearly in Paul Hunter’s “The Deal” in this issue of *Windfall*:

He chops the ice for his horses
to drink maybe ninety times a year
that when it’s thin enough
they break though for themselves

even so when they can they
return the favor working with a will
they pull they back they stand
before and after stand some more

though they can’t toss down
the hay for themselves they can
mow waiting only the word
all knowing they’re getting a deal

It’s not just the “ninety times a year” that suggests experience but also the inductive logic at work: the speaker has experienced enough instances of these undramatic events to feel confident at drawing a

conclusion about how the horses must perceive this arrangement. Description of landscape takes a back seat, but we do learn that we're situated where the weather is freezing for three months and horses are used for mowing fields.

That repetition of experience over long periods of time is at the heart of the idea of place might suggest that a one-time visit to a mountaintop or public square or shoreline which moves us emotionally won't lead to a strong poem of place. That's not necessarily so, though experiencing a place only one time calls for compensating strategies. One approach to be wary of is the easy statement of amazement. In an interview about writing of place, Barbara Ras, director of Trinity University Press, puts her finger on the problem and points to the solution: "Writers are getting more sophisticated and content-conscious. I'm not interested in what Kim Stafford called 'first-person rhapsodic' because it's just too bland and vapid." She looks for the writer's presentation of the invisible landscape, continuing, "I'm interested in something that's going to deliver local lore and legend, culture, history, and natural history—coherent useful knowledge that not only informs you about a place but instructs you about how to be in the world." A weekend visitor or a traveler zooming by on a highway can hardly begin to extract the essence of the place, even knowing the names of the physical features. It's necessary to know what's happened in a place. Without considerable personal experience of a place, the writer needs to learn more from other sources. That may be from books, maps, or even photos, as with Lex Runciman's "Columbia River, Mitchell Point," with its description of Carleton Watkins' "silver mammoth albumen print." Or it may be from what those who have the place "in their muscles and bones" have to say, which often comes through the local lore and legend, picked up most easily in conversation.

Another strategy for first-time visits is to create experiences through action, rather than relying on passive description and admiration of the features of a place. The action itself may not be momentous; probably the more ordinary it is, the better. A glance at some of the poems in this issue illustrate the technique: in Steve Hood's "Frigid Winds," "plastic

hard hats” are carrying steel pipes and old timers are telling stories; in Bill Mawhinney’s “Fungo King of Rialto Beach,” a man is walking the beach tossing stones into the air and hitting them into the surf with a piece of driftwood as if hitting a baseball with a Louisville Slugger; in Pepper Trail’s “Killing Barred Owls,” the speaker pulls the trigger of his gun to make a barred owl “explode / like a burst pillow”; in Eric le Fatte’s “Lessons from Mt. Fricaba,” the two hikers practice inhaling and exhaling at high elevation by patterning their breathing after what they observe and “measure” at their alpine stopping-place. In each instance, people are interacting with the landscape, not passively describing.

Some of these comments on the “invisible landscape” may sound like we’re advocating poems of more lived-in areas, rather than poems located in the natural world. Yes, and no: Poems of lived-in places generally offer the potential for a far greater complexity than poems of wild places because more people have had experiences there, which means a larger range of material to work with and thicker layers of meaning. We’d like to see more poems set in built landscapes, especially poems considering the more problematic relationship between people and nature in built landscapes. But wild areas work well for poems of place, too. People often bring their own culturally bred expectations to a wild place, which means that the interaction between a poem’s speaker and a “pristine” landscape typically engenders a rather limited range of reactions. This is where an acknowledgement of the “invisible landscape” can make the difference between an excellent poem of place and a clichéd, predictable poem in which the speaker arrives, names some flora and fauna and landforms, and in concluding expresses amazement.

Even the most “pristine” landscape usually isn’t so pure and unspoiled, once more is learned about it. As Bill McKibben explains in *The End of Nature*, there is no place on earth that hasn’t been affected by human activity. In *Eaarth*, he asserts that we have altered the planet so much, it’s no longer the earth we have always known. Human activity has changed the atmosphere, the composition of the very air in every “natural” place, as well as world-wide weather patterns and the acidity

of the oceans. Our heat waves and increasingly destructive storms are now likely man-made phenomena. And yet, McKibben points out, we have a considerable ability to shut out the radiation, carbon dioxide levels, invasive species, and degraded landscapes from our mind, and see only the beautiful scene we expect to see. When we haven't layered a landscape with significance through repetitive experience or stories from others, the cultural stereotypes of the beauty of nature often obscure the reality in front of us.

Many of the poems we publish in *Windfall* acknowledge the despoilment of a particular landscape, yet still reveal a layer of natural beauty. Laura Snyder's "Grace" in this issue, for instance, lets us see what no longer is actually visible on the Tacoma shoreline of Puget Sound, telling us

There are no earthen
banks left to the river, no sustaining estuaries.
The city of Tacoma claimed the marshland

of the Puyallup River where it drains
into the salt of Puget Sound.

After these and other reminders of the health that the landscape once had—an old man on the bench had once fished with a bamboo pole here—we look at the detritus of this landscape's industrial reality today. And yet there is beauty—the poem lets us see a third layer of meaning of the landscape, telling us "it is easy to lose sight / of what sustains us. This is the floodplain of Mt. Rainier." Along with the man in the poem, we end by lifting our gaze to the "snow-fractured face" of Rainier. In twenty-one lines of tercets, we have imagined a man's experience with the landscape when it was healthy, we've seen it as is industrially, and then seen it more geographically as a essential floodplain. Two of the three landscapes we've been shown would have been invisible to the outsider who arrived and simply looked.

Human artifacts play an essential role in turning a landscape into a “place.” Much as we would like to think in terms of “pristine” landscapes and an independent natural world, the mining slag, the logging cables, and ceramic electrical insulators nailed to trees that we encounter in “wilderness areas” all suggest other, more interesting and more complex stories. The jet plane high overhead, the haze, the distant highway sounds, are all part of a place.

Sometimes a human artifact provides the central meaning of a poem. In this issue’s poem “The Iron Chinks,” George Such uses the early twentieth-century machine that gutted and cleaned salmon in Northwest canneries to capture an entire range of issues and attitudes about machines replacing workers, immigration, and racism. The close description of the machine in the last line makes clear its role from a Chinese-American perspective: “motor silent, pipes and faucets rusted dry, / but jaws open, teeth showing.”

Perhaps the surest way to capture the flavor of a place is to choose words that belong particularly to that place. In this issue alone, many poems employ terms particularly tied to Pacific Northwest places, for landscape features—*high tide, flood tide, estuary, rainforest, basalt, coulee, high desert, fumaroles, mist, glaciers, permafrost, muskeg*; for flora—*salmonberry, cedars, Douglas fir, hemlock, sagebrush, Ponderosa pine*; for fauna—*hermit and Swainson’s thrush, bittern, barred owl, spotted owl, jackrabbits, rattlesnakes, chum salmon, elk, caribou*; for human artifacts—*purse seines, gillnetters, crabbers, Iron Chinks*. Then there’s the naming of human activities that are particularly likely to be found in the Pacific Northwest: dry wheat farming, composting food scraps, climbing mountains, working on a ship in drydock, hiking a trail. These are words of the language of Northwest places.

Many intriguing terms for typical Northwest landscape features can be found in Barry Lopez and Debra Gwartney’s *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*. Entertaining, detailed, and very readable definitions of Northwest landscape terms have been written by such Northwest writers as Kim Barnes, John Daniel, John Keeble,

William Kittredge, Robert Michael Pyle, Carolyn Servid, and Kim Stafford. Ryden says, "Unlike simple geographical locations, which exist objectively, places do not exist until they are verbalized, first in thought and memory and then through the spoken or written word." These are terms that capture what Lopez calls our "homescape": *clearcut, krummholz, loess, rain shadow, sea stack, snow line, slash*.

Robert Lowell's widely anthologized 1960 poem "For the Union Dead" demonstrates many of the ways in which the "invisible landscape" can add personal and historic resonance to a poem. Lowell uses St. Gaudens' Shaw monument on Beacon Hill opposite the statehouse in Boston as the centerpiece for exploring the injustice experienced by African-Americans in the past and during the forced school desegregation occurring at the time in the South. The poem opens with the time and place made clear (winter, old South Boston Aquarium), followed immediately by "the invisible landscape" which the aquarium conjures, from his childhood:

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

The bubbles coming from the "cowed, compliant fish" provide a central image of the poem, recurring when the speaker sees on the television set "the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons," and when we're told that "Colonel Shaw / is riding on his bubble, / he waits / for the blessed break." At the end of the 68-line poem, we return to the image of the fish which the long-ago aquarium has provided the poem, and get a description of how things are now:

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

The opening “place” of the poem, the site of the old aquarium, provides “invisible” bubbles and fish that tie in to a long-dead Civil War hero, school children accompanied by federal marshals, and the Eisenhower-era consumerist, conformist mentality. The rising bubbles are associated with the brave colonel and children, the lower-down fish with everyone else.

Three middle stanzas of humans interacting with nature close by the Shaw memorial even pull the Puritans of long-ago Massachusetts in the current redevelopment of Boston Common to accommodate more giant cars:

Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens’ shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage’s earthquake.

The speaker is watching how the desire to accommodate ever more cars is gouging the common and shaking the statehouse and Shaw memorial. What’s to preserve the older values of a common, a

statehouse, and a monument to African-American soldiers and their leader? For the statehouse, at least, the “invisible landscape” is a scene of Puritans and pumpkins, suggesting the first Thanksgiving, as if those founders of the first Massachusetts colony are supporting the state now. In describing the place, Lowell’s metaphors imply other stories we’re familiar with, of powerful dinosaurs going extinct and Puritan rigidity enabling survival.

Poetry of place in some respects is a poetry of witness. A poem says, “This place existed like this.” Sometimes the poem testifies to the ravages that have clearly been inflicted upon a place; sometimes it testifies to damage done long ago to a place which now gives scant evidence of it, as in Mary Ellen Talley’s “Trail of the Coeur d’Alenes Superfund Site”; sometimes it testifies to the goodness of a place. In each instance, the poem exerts more power, gets closer to the complexity of reality, and makes the place more significant when it recognizes the layers of stories in the “invisible landscape” and enables them to reverberate throughout the poem.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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