

Afterword

## The Transformations

At *Windfall* we receive and publish numerous poems of transformations that take place in everyday life. These transformations are an unconcealing or revelation of the ordinary processes of living, as in Pepper Trail's "Predation" in the spring 2011 issue of *Windfall*, wherein a robin is transformed in its relationship to a hawk (first and last stanzas):

The robin did not want to die today  
On the gentle slope at the edge of the lawn  
But it did, breast pressed in the grass  
Beneath the yellow legs of the hawk, implacable  
Talons curving through the feathers to pierce the heart  
Cradling the shivering bird through its end.  
.....  
I, behind my window, stood and left my desk  
Walked down the corridor and out the door  
To get outside, to see what I had seen.  
Of the robin, this remained: restless feathers  
Scattering, two delicate booted legs and  
The yellow beak, top and bottom, open wide.

Like the cycle of predation, most processes in nature and in the daily life of people offer occasions of what we might call common or ordinary transformation. Often they are the vehicle of many kinds of poems wherein the speaker of the poem encounters some kind of revelation, as the speaker in Trail's poem must go outside to "see what I had seen," to experience the full measure of predation, and by implication we too will follow that robin open-mouthed into the dark.

Transformation can take numerous forms and perspectives, specifically in terms of place, and no single accounting can cover how numerous those forms are. However, we would like to suggest a few categories of transformation, with examples, in hopes of encouraging new poems of place in the Pacific Northwest with themes of transformation.

One of the very oldest of such themes is the return to a place where one had lived before, which in the meantime has been wholly transformed by time passing and sometimes by rapid changes. Classic examples appear in ancient Chinese poetry, wherein the poets are cast as inveterate wanderers, always arriving and departing and returning. In 759 CE, just after the Imperial forces had lost the battle at Xiangzhou to the Tianbao rebellion, the poet Du Fu returns to his village (opening lines):

Ever since Tianbao, silence and desolation,  
field and sheds mere masses of pigweed and bramble.  
My village, a hundred households or more,  
in these troubled times scattered east and west,  
not a word from those still living  
the dead all gone to dust and mire.  
I was on the side that lost the battle,  
came home, looked for the old paths,  
so long on the road, to find empty lanes,  
sun grown feeble, pain and sorrow in the air.  
All I meet are foxes and raccoon dogs;  
fur on end, they snarl at me in anger.  
For neighbors on four sides who do I have?  
One or two aging widows.

—Translated by Burton Watson

Few of us may have Du Fu's experience of returning home to a war-torn landscape and social breakdown, but sometimes slower processes of change can be just as devastating. Robert Davies has written extensively about the town of Timber, Oregon, where twentieth-century logging left boom-and-bust ruin behind, a fate common to many small towns in the Pacific Northwest. In "I Don't Know Why" he says,

the surrounding hamlet  
its post office for sale  
rusting train rails  
school and inn burned

most of the trees chopped  
heaps of rubbish in a failed country—

The theme of returning after many years to a place where one grew up appeals to poets, as well as their readers. This theme in particular occupies the attention of Oregon poet Gary Lark. Lark grew up in Roseburg, Oregon. His poem “Fall Planting” is set in the Umpqua Valley:

When I was young skeins of geese  
would V across the October sky  
sounding a chorus for my brother and me  
prostrate in brittle hillside grass.

In three further stanzas, Lark recounts how a flood would leave new silt upon the fields, followed by rich harvests of vegetables, fruit, and nuts. But in the last stanza, we emerge in the present situation:

Houses sprout in the fields, now  
as we replant willows and alder  
along scoured creek banks.  
I look up, listening.

Instead of reaping the harvests of the Edenic past, the speaker and his brother are salvaging the ruins of the creek banks in the valley. Houses have occupied the fields. In a last line that implies loss, the speaker looks up and listens, but he does not say that the geese are passing, as in the first stanza. Many of us in the Northwest (and elsewhere) have experienced the kind of loss Lark is talking about. And yet, at *Windfall* we receive very few poems on this theme of then-and-now. Even negative transformation can give substance to a poem that testifies to the reality of our lives and the way land is used and abused in our culture. We welcome such poems at *Windfall*.

Returning to a place may not always be such a sad occasion. Barbara Drake reminds us in her poem “Life Map: South Coast” that sometimes a familiar place will revive precious memories. When she was thirty-five, she acquired some land and built a shack, and then she lists the

changes in the next thirty-five years of her adopted place:

I visit when I can, and this year  
I finally got electricity and water. A little light,  
a little heater in the shack, a better driveway.  
Today, a frosty morning in November,  
I had my first drink from the new well.  
It was good water, not the fountain of youth,  
but for a moment when I drank it  
I was still thirty-five.

Mary Lou Sanelli in her poem “Two Decades in a Small Town” (Port Townsend) shows us changes that have taken place while staying put in the same place. Like Robert Davies and Barbara Drake, Sanelli shows how changes can be swiftly revealed in just a few lines:

It’s true, years buzz by  
like flies do, the warmest part of the day,  
and places inevitably change  
when housing costs rise like helium,  
strip malls spring up, cars speed up,  
people too hurried to chat anymore,  
our town like a kid in a suit,  
fancy too fast.

The flies are a deft touch—something more readily noticeable in a small town than in a big city. In the changes Sanelli cites, we see how things used to be in this small town: affordable housing, small stores instead of malls, slower traffic, people inclined to stop and chat, and simpler ways.

The California poet Joseph Stroud once said, “You’re lucky if you can go back to the place where you grew up. The neighborhood where I grew up in Los Angeles is now under a freeway.” This sense of loss also pervades our lives, when all that we have is memory, and sometimes this will have to suffice, as Jack Gilbert reminds us in some of his later poems, most notably in these lines from “The Lost Hotels of Paris”:

It is right to mourn  
for the small hotels of Paris that used to be  
when we used to be. My mansard looking  
down on Notre Dame every morning is gone,  
and me listening to the bell at night.  
Venice is no more. The best Greek islands  
have drowned in acceleration. But it's the having  
not the keeping that is the treasure.  
Ginsberg came to my house one afternoon  
and said he was giving up poetry  
because it told lies, that language distorts.  
I agreed, but asked what we have  
that gets it right even that much.  
We look up at the stars and they are  
not there. We see the memory  
of when they were, once upon a time.  
And that too is more than enough.

Certainly in the history of poetry about things that are no more, that have faded from presence, we may find that humor or irony could be the true perspective on the situation. Clem Starck, who usually writes of building, in the following poem writes of its opposite, called "Dismantling":

Smack in the public eye  
at Ninth and Van Buren, tearing down  
an old house—  
"Not demolition, dismantling!" says Joel. Slowly  
we make the house disappear.  
It takes a few months.  
We do this for a living.  
Our sign says:  
USED LUMBER FOR SALE.  
Neat stacks of it on the front lawn  
around a dormant forsythia—

shiplap and siding, and over here  
we have two-by...  
*That* pile is already sold.

We also have toilets, sinks, remarkable  
savings on bent nails,  
French doors, free kindling  
and more. Lots more.

With the roof off  
a house looks more like a cathedral,  
rafters outlined against the sky.  
A pair of ragged priests,  
stick by stick we celebrate  
nothing. We are making the shape of nothing.  
creating  
an absence.

And when we have finished,  
what will there be at Ninth and Van Buren?  
A square of bare earth  
where a house was.  
Sidewalk. Foundation. Concrete stoop.  
Two steps up  
and you're there.

The speaker and Joel are like a pair of Zen “ragged priests” celebrating the creation of nothing on a corner lot in Corvallis, Oregon. They do not destroy, but rather recycle, so the poem is not about loss, but about a positive transformation of old materials into new building supplies. But what is left of the old house, so transformed, is nothing but bare earth (though you need a concrete stoop to get there!). Starck’s poem is a rare masterpiece of the transformation of place, wherein the place (building) is unconcealed, not by means of its construction, but by means of its “deconstruction.”

John Haines (1924-2011), who lived many years on a homestead in Alaska, writes of how nature dismantles what humans have built. From his late collection of poems, *For the Century's End*, he addresses our ultimate reliance on earth and sky:

THE GHOST TOWNS

"The North is strewn with cities  
of one winter..."

I have seen them, the tinderboxes  
stacked upon each other,  
their wind-structures fallen,  
no way to enter now but the gates of frost.

They were lighted by the pressure  
lamps of fever, by lamp-men  
trimming soot and breaking coal,  
reading by the fire of their wicks  
the cold logic of the snow.

It was all dream and delirium,  
the amazed rumor of gold—a letter  
carried in a stampeder's pocket,  
unread, and the homeland long forgotten.

As I have held my hand above a candle,  
seen the red flesh glow  
and the knotted bones darken,

so will these buildings leave  
their trusses charred and crossed,  
the graveyards lettered  
with a script no one can read...

And over the bleak and gutted land  
no wall to stop the wind—  
one space, one frame for all.

Haines appears to be speaking of the social collapse that leads to ghost towns, but he also seems to reaffirm the “one frame” by which all things live and die. Like Starck’s partly dismantled house, the rafters begin to resemble a cathedral in Haines’s “trusses charred and crossed,” except that in Haines human agency is not involved, but only the forces of nature: wind and the cold logic of snow producing a “bleak and gutted land.” In the end, we have to learn to live again in that “one space, one frame for all.”

Suppose we carry the concept of transformation into a wider context, for instance, Shanghai, China. Shanghai is the largest city in China, and at 23 million, one of the largest cities in the world. In 1989 Tomas Tranströmer, 2011 winner of the Nobel Prize, published a poem based on his visit here called “Streets in Shanghai,” the third part of which evokes the crowded city:

At dawn the crowds get our silent planet going with their  
tramping.

We are all aboard the street. It is packed like the deck of  
a ferry.

Where are we going? Are there enough teacups? We can  
count ourselves lucky getting aboard this street!

It’s a thousand years before the birth of claustrophobia.

Behind each one of us hovers a cross that wants to catch  
up with us, overtake us, unite with us.

Something that wants to creep up behind us and cover our  
eyes and whisper, “Guess who!”

We look almost happy out in the sun, while we are bleeding  
fatally from wounds we don’t know about.

—Translated by Robin Fulton

The crowded street in Shanghai is compared to a ferry boat, which conveys the feeling of being jammed with others into a finite space, a sense of claustrophobia. Though the poem says we haven’t really experienced claustrophobia yet, in 1989 when the poem was published,



the population of Earth was a little over 5 billion, and today it is 7 billion. Are we feeling claustrophobic yet? The sense of Earth as a finite space conveys the reality of our situation, without ever mentioning the words “population” or “overpopulation.” What is that cross that wants to catch up with us? Perhaps it is the rush of people reproducing themselves pushing us along, perhaps it is our fate. The last line confirms that we do not know how our fate both pursues us and awaits us like the dead robin in Pepper Trail’s poem at the beginning of this afterword. Tranströmer makes brilliant use of the unknown in this poem. He frames it by showing us through metaphor how it feels to be swept along on a street in one of the most crowded cities in the world. Population is one of the main drivers of climate change: More people means more greenhouse gasses produced in order to feed, house, and transport them.

When it comes to transformations, the largest one that looms before us is climate change. That is, we know some things, and we must imagine the rest. Clive Hamilton, an Australian professor of public ethics, writes in 2010 about what we know:

It is widely accepted in international negotiations that if global average temperatures increase by 2°C above the pre-industrial average then we will pass into the danger zone. Warming of 2°C is the most likely outcome if greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere are allowed to increase to 450 ppm....

As I will argue, the chances of stopping warming at 2°C above pre-industrial levels are virtually zero because the chances of keeping concentrations below 450 ppm are virtually zero.... The Earth’s temperature is already 0.8°C above its long-term average, and existing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere mean that another 0.7°C of heating is in the pipeline and unavoidable, even if emissions fell to zero tomorrow.

Most leading climate scientists now believe that 2°C of warming would pose a substantial risk both because of its direct impacts on climactically sensitive Earth systems and because

of the potential to trigger irreversible changes in those systems. The latter include the disappearance of Arctic summer ice and melting of much of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets. James Hansen has declared the goal of keeping warming at 2°C “a recipe for global disaster.” He believes the safe level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere is no more than 350 ppm. The current level of CO<sub>2</sub> is 385 ppm, rising at around 2 ppm each year, so that we have already overshot our target....

While Hamilton describes our situation regarding global warming in the dry terms of degrees Celsius and parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, these terms are hard to grasp in an immediate sense. Even the melting of ice sheets seems meaningless without some idea of the consequences, such as more moisture in the oceans and atmosphere, which leads to rising sea levels and the atmospheric disturbances that lead to larger and more powerful storms. Indeed, Hurricane Sandy in December of 2012 is the kind of consequence that garners attention. Ian Frazier, surveying the damage left by Sandy on Staten Island, writes the following sentence:

Standing in a soggy no man’s forest near a beach, with invasive Japanese honeysuckle and bittersweet and greenbrier vines dragging down the trees, and shreds of plastic bags in the branches, and a dirty snow of Styrofoam crumbs on the ground, and heaps of hurricane detritus strewn promiscuously, and fierce phragmites reeds spring up all over, I saw the landscape of the new hot world to come.

Frazier explains that phragmites (“frag-mighties”) are a non-native invasive species of reed that reproduces by both seeds and rhizomes, and survives climactic and chemical changes of many kinds—just the sort of plant to prevail in a hotter world. By presenting vivid sensory details, Frazier gives us a visceral sense of what climate change can mean. Surely poetry can achieve as much if not more by means of imagery and metaphor, two of its most powerful tools.

Why should poetry attempt to evoke for readers the effects of climate change where they live? The most immediate answer is that most people—most of the potential audience for poetry—are in denial about climate change. As Tranströmer says, “We are bleeding fatally from wounds we don’t know about.” Ezra Pound characterized poets as the “antennae of the race,” because they intuitively perceive what is coming for us all and make that vision accessible through their work. In particular, the poetry of place would seem to be most amenable to evoking the effects of global warming, a world that Bill McKibben has renamed “Eaarth,” because it no longer resembles the old Earth that we knew, the one of preindustrial stable temperatures and less than 350 ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> that made civilization possible. What can we say in poetry that will make our work readable to our children and grandchildren, so they don’t dismiss us as mere dilettantes during the most profound transformation of this planet that humankind will ever encounter?

In the Pacific Northwest, we have not yet endured a disaster like Hurricane Sandy or other consequences attributed to global warming (drought, floods, massive forest fires, tornadoes—or the massive February snowstorm that struck the eastern seaboard because of the five-degree-warmer Atlantic Ocean, which also fueled Sandy). So we cannot expect a poetry that responds to disasters the way Ian Frazier responds to the aftermath of Sandy. However, poets who live in or visit Alaska might have something to report, since effects of global warming occur earliest in the north.

Even so, the local effects of global warming do not have to be catastrophic to be acknowledged. Observers—university botanists, amateur gardeners, government agencies, school children, and ordinary citizens—who keep track of budburst in spring are called phenologists (after the Greek φαίνω [*phainō*], “to show, to bring to light, make to appear”). Spring has been arriving steadily earlier. Since daylight length does not change beyond its path to the solstices, it is assumed that plants are detecting a steady rise in temperature and are responding earlier. In a sense, all poets are phenologists now, and our own observations of changes in places in the Pacific Northwest can become vehicles for

poetry. Shelley Kirk-Rudeen gave phenological observation a local context:

ZUMWALT PRAIRIE

The shadows of clouds race northward.  
Above the shush of wind in pine and grass,  
listen: timbers groaning,  
the ark creaking to life.

This will be no gathering of two by two.  
There will be no one place to call home.  
Everything on the move, leaving  
to become native to new places  
as the old homes change,

traveling by windblown seed, by wing,  
by cloven hoof and padded foot,  
in bellies and in dung, in water's flow.

And what of the ones who travel  
by rhizome's reach,  
by the exquisite slowness of slime trail?

And what of the ones who must stay?  
Is it only their names we will carry forward?

One possible alternative to complex societies is to turn our attention back to where we live. Martin Heidegger speaks of the fourfold contingencies of our dwelling here: earth, sky, mortality, and divinities. Thinking of experience in any one or all of these interrelated terms can lead us to the terms of our work, to the elements of our experience that show us what needs to be said. We need to learn to love where we live, no matter how damaged. Leanne Simpson, a Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer in Canada, says, "There's still a lot of beauty in Lake Ontario. It's one of those threatened lakes and it's dying and no one wants to eat the fish. But there is a lot of beauty still in that lake. There is a lot of love still in that lake.... If you can't swim in it, canoe across it. Find a way

to connect to it." We need to learn how to make that kind of connection to find that love she speaks of. It won't be easy, and it won't be easy to write the poetry we need so much, but only we can do it. *Windfall* is ready to receive your best efforts.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

### **Works referred to in this afterword**

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