Afterword

Poetry of Place-Based Skills and Crafts

As the days of abundant and inexpensive oil draw to a close, and as the global effects on the climate and on the oceans of burning oil and coal and other carbons become more evident and threatening, we will inevitably be using less fossil fuel in the future. Without inexpensive fuel to bring us foods grown thousands of miles away and to bring us shoes, clothes, and toys made in distant third-world countries, we'll likely find that we'll be growing and manufacturing closer to home many of the things we need. What are the skills and crafts that have fallen into disuse or been replaced during the past hundred years of inexpensive energy? The first world has outsourced many tasks that people have commonly done within their community. It may well be that the skills which our grandparents and great-grandparents valued will be resurrected. We could use a poetry which pays attention to the skills and crafts most needed and appropriate to particular places.

As John Michael Greer points out, the road to life with less oil will probably lead to neither apocalypse nor utopia. Such change happens slowly from the point of view of someone living through it. Just as fossil-fuel-based economies developed gradually over the last two hundred years, their decline is likely to be gradual, with sudden dislocations followed by periods of relative stability. The price of oil may rise noticeably, the banking system may experience more frequent crises, systems dependent on fossil fuel may be downsized or disappear, and people will suffer and adapt. Without adequate oil, or with only very expensive oil, we are unlikely to travel great distances, and our possessions are unlikely to have come from far away. We are likely to feel the sense of community around us more and to share more than we do today. Not everyone has to know everything, as survivalists and the myth of rugged individualism posit; a community is a gathering of many skills. What are the forgotten fundamental ways of dwelling which a community needs to recall?

The most likely skills are those involved in gardening. Poets who write of gardening often embed into their poems necessary knowledge, as gardener-poet Charles Goodrich does in his prose poem "Mudding-in Peas":

> Courting the muse is not like sowing peas. You can sit quietly all through February, pencil in hand, quivering with attention for hours on end, and you may or may not be given a poem. But you sure won't grow any peas.
>
> For peas you must leave your desk, step into your boots, and go out to the garden. You will be on the cusp of winter, a bite to the air, the soil barely awake. Hard to believe any seed would want to be sown this early.
>
> But now your faith in the muse pays off. Your long apprenticeship to whatever happens prepares you to believe in the genius of a pea. The seed is ready. And you are ready to assist it. And you have a pencil, perfect for dibbling the holes.

Goodrich blends into the poem several bits of important information: Peas are planted earlier than most things, as winter is just ending, and peas get planted in holes the size a poet's pencil could make in the soil. Most important: Planting requires apprenticeship. Planting requires the same attention as waiting for a poem.

The crafts involved in gardening have filled volumes of poetry. Our spring 2009 afterword on "Gardener Poets" suggested ways to go about writing gardening poems, and past *Windfalls* have included a number of poems about gardening. What we are suggesting now is that such poems inconspicuously embed instructions while going about the business of exploring whatever the poem is exploring. Every climate and microclimate needs its own gardening poems, because techniques that work in one place don't necessarily work in others. Bill Siverly's "Turning Compost," for instance, provides enough detail for readers in the Northwest to make compost for themselves:

Mid-September I pull the cord on my Tomahawk,
a roaring 8-horse chipper nobody makes anymore.
Over a month its spinning flails reduce a mountain of brush
to a few wheelbarrows of chips, as hungry blue jays shout.

Late October I mow up magnolia, maple, and alder leaves,
pile them over the chips, sprinkle a handful of nitrogen,
and just add water to ignite the slow invisible fire,
the whole pile steaming under November frost.

A sunny day in January I fork apart *nigredo*,
compost gone cold in damp decay, and smell the sweet
dark matter of mystery, root of all that grows.
I make a mound of chips and a mound of leaves,
and then I break for lunch, for an hour, for a day.

I rebuild the pile: layer of leaves, layer of chips,
a little nitrogen and water every three layers or so.
The re-ignited pile begins to steam and sink
under flurries of February snow.

Middle of March I fork the first wheelbarrows
of dense and juicy compost from the loaf.
I spread it over garden mounds for spuds, lettuce, onions,
peas.
Robins whistle and bumblebees hum over humus reborn.

It's one of the oldest traditions in European poetry to incorporate all that's important for a culture to remember into memorable lines, which are willingly carried forward by following generations because they both teach and delight. The English language is filled with remnants of poetry that hundreds of years after its creation we still hold onto. Some have suggested that when most Europeans were still illiterate, English common law was written in verse so it could be more easily recalled

when needed. We still hear the poetic echoes, so the argument goes, in such phrases as "to have and to hold," "to cease and desist" "to aid and abet." Most scriptures were written in elevated poetic language so they'd be more likely remembered.

So, what local learning do we of the Northwest need to recover and retain? One important set of skills is cooking and preparing for eating whatever grows in the area. Having just dug a limit of razor clams, for instance, what does a person need to do to render them fit for eating? How does a cook get the sand out of the clam's middle? How do you stop the clam from dying before cooking? What in the clam is edible and what inedible? Similar questions might be asked about most other food we take from the sea and our waterways—Pacific littlenecks, salmon, Dungeness crabs, sturgeon, eels. Here's Michael Blumenthal providing instructions on preparing squid while talking of love:

> SQUID
> So this is love:
>
> How you grimace at the sight
> of these fish; how I pull
> (forefinger, then thumb)
> the fins and tails from the heads,
> slice the tentacles from the accusing eyes.
>
> And then how I pile the silvery ink sacs
> into the sieve like old fillings, heap
> the entrails and eyes on a towel in the corner;
> and how you sauté the onions and garlic,
> how they turn soft and transparent, lovely
> in their own way, and how you turn to me
> and say, simply, *isn't this fun, isn't it?*
>
> And something tells me this all has to do
> with love, perhaps even more than lust

or happiness have to do with love:
How the fins slip easily from the tails,
how I peel the membranes from the fins
and cones like a man peeling his body
from a woman after love, how these
ugly squid diminish in grotesqueness
and all nausea reduces, finally, to a hunger
for what is naked and approachable,

tangible and delicious.

When we eat more locally, we begin to become aware of the foods growing nearby that haven't been marketed by the corporations in control of supermarkets or the many political powers that have made the US Farm Bill encourage massive production of corn and soy and discourage a wide range of crops and many varieties of a species. Many who have subscribed to a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) have discovered in their delivered boxes a few local vegetables which they have no idea of how to prepare. Every locale could use some poems to help the hapless cook deal with local produce. Jimmy Santiago Baca in "Green Chile" teaches through his grandmother—often it's the older generations we must learn such things from—while reimagining his grandmother's relationship with chiles:

she holds the green chile pepper
in her wrinkled hands.
Ah, voluptuous, masculine,
an air of authority and youth simmers
from its swan-neck stem, tapering to a flowery
collar, fermenting resinous spice.
A well-dressed gentleman at the door
my grandmother takes sensuously in her hand,
rubbing its firm glossed sides,
caressing the oily rubbery serpent,

with mouth-watering fulfillment,
fondling its curves with gentle fingers.
Its bearing magnificent and taut
as flanks of a tiger in mid-leap,
she thrusts her blade into
and cuts it open, with lust
on her hot mouth, sweating over the stove,
bandanna round her forehead,
mysterious passion on her face
as she serves me green chile con carne
between soft warm leaves of corn tortillas,
with beans and rice . . . .

Most poets dealing with food and drink write of the pleasure of eating and drinking, but others have written poems of instruction about all that happens to a food before it hits the plate, offering a variety of models for such poems. Yusef Komunyakaa tells of following and observing how his father planted potatoes in "Banking Potatoes." In "Bread," Sharon Olds uses a metaphor of baking bread to describe her pre-adolescent daughter, while off-handedly giving details about how to make bread in such asides as "she heats the water to body temperature . . . ." In "The Traveling Onion," Naomi Shihab Nye's speaker "could kneel and praise / all small forgotten miracles" when she thinks of the onion which has entered her stew.

In discussing our possible futures with transportation curtailed, Greer says that whoever can brew beer is likely to become very popular in any neighborhood. With our abundance of barley and hops and a large number of craft breweries and home brewers in the Northwest, we could produce a number of poems that convey elements of brewing techniques. Our consumer society has produced thousands of poems about drinking beer, but few about its brewing. Ancient Sumerians believed that beer was important enough to preserve a poem enclosing a recipe for brewing it. In a clay tablet text dating from around 1900 BCE, the poem's speaker praises Ninkasi, the goddess of beer and alcohol,

and as part of the praise presents the essential beer-brewing steps of combining bread, yeast, and grains in a vessel to ferment and then filter into a container. In honor of the goddess and the ancient tradition of brewing beer, a local Northwest brewery in Eugene, Oregon, has taken the name "Ninkasi."

Many domestic tasks could also use poems, such as hemming a pair of pants or washing dishes without a dishwasher, as in Al Zolnas's "The Zen of Housework." In a recent edition of *Orion* magazine, Ana Marie Spagna presents "10 Skills to Hone for a Post-Oil Future." Some of the skills are unexpected, such as "houseguest hosting," "handwriting," "grafting," and beyond the house, "blacksmithing." In the comments section after her article in the online edition of *Orion*, readers have also suggested community-building, storytelling, porch-sitting, tool-sharing, food preservation, carpentry, welding, electrical skills, basket-making, bicycle repair, spinning, weaving, beekeeping, rain-water capturing, tinkering, and toilet-composting. Another such skill is unfamiliar to urban people today, but may one day require re-learning, as Wendell Berry shows in "For the Hog-Killing":

> Let them stand still for the bullet, and stare the shooter in the eye,
> let them die while the sound of the shot is in the air, let them die as they fall,
> let the jugular blood spring hot to the knife, let its freshet be full,
> let this day begin again the change of hogs into people, not the other way around,
> for today we celebrate again our lives' wedding with the world
> for by our hunger, by this provisioning, we renew the bond.

Hog-killing and many of the tasks listed by Spagna are difficult, but they should be done as celebration, for the work of dwelling is our bond with the world. If you are vegetarian, you might rather write

about stalking the wild chanterelle or harvesting nettles in the spring.

Then, too, there are dangers to avoid in the landscapes around us. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz points out that marine maps sometimes label areas with the warning "Local Knowledge Advised." What warnings about our locales do we need to embed in poetry? "Leaves of three, let them be," parents say to teach children to avoid poison oak, poison sumac, and poison ivy. What else do we need warning about where we live? We know not to play in the surf on an outgoing tide; not to cut toward ourselves with the sharp edge of a knife; not to wade across a rocky mountain stream whose bottom we can't see; not to drink or cook with glacial water. Maxine Kumin shows in her poem "Immutable Laws" how local wisdom is transmitted generation to generation. Many of us have experienced such warnings:

> Never buy land on a slope, my father declared
> the week before his heart gave out.
> We bit down hard on a derelict dairy farm
> of tilting fields, hills, humps and granite outcrops.
>
> Never bet what you can't afford to lose,
> he lectured. I bet my soul on a tortured horse
> who never learned to love, but came to trust me.
>
> Spend your money close to where you earn it,
> he dictated. Nothing made him crosser
> than wives who drove to New York to go shopping
> when Philly stores had everything they needed.

And then there are the mistakes we are likely to make in simply managing to survive, often despite the best intentions. In his prose poem ominously entitled "Extinction," David Axelrod describes gyppo loggers felling trees on a steep slope all of one day. "We stood at creekside" the next day, the speaker says, "snow squalls blustering across the hills, and watched a plume of mud drift over salmon redds

downstream." One day of quick logging above a creek, the speaker implies, may well wipe out an entire generation of salmon in the creek, or the entire run.

Greer suggests that there will be no great cataclysmic break with the past as we learn to deal with less oil and more expensive energy. We are likely now beginning an era of "scarcity industrialism," eventually to be followed by a "salvage society" in which we use and repair and reuse, as long as we can—for generations, perhaps—the already existing machinery and infrastructure that we can't afford to replace. It's unlikely that our industrial society would ever revert to a pre-industrial state of say, the early 1700s. But we may be doing more things ourselves, instead of calling in professionals. With most Americans working at white-collar jobs, in not just professional or managerial positions, but also in clerical, service, and high-tech software positions, practical manual skills are becoming rarer. We might consider embedding in poetry our remaining skills and understanding of the mechanical world, as Clem Starck has done in what could be an ode to the "salvage society," "Looking for Parts":

1
Leaning on the counter of the local
auto parts store,
a man is telling a story
about a clutch.

What *I'm* after is a left front
shock absorber bracket
for my pickup. He's only looking
for conversation.

He looks like Humphrey Bogart
with a blotchy face. I probably
look odd myself.

"Those old Chevies were good trucks,"
we agree. Our lives
are linked by machines.

2

They don't have the part,
but I get one from the wrecker:
left hand gloved in leather
to hold the cold-chisel, right hand brandishing
a maul . . .
Down on one knee in the weeds,
bent over a wrecked truck chassis,
I notice the ground is soaked
with crankcase oil
and littered with nuts and bolts.

Straightening up, I can see
a black dog chained
to an old yellow schoolbus. Acres of scrapmetal
flaking with rust.
A goldfinch flits through a thistle patch.

3

A plywood and tarpaper shack
has *OFFiCE* lettered crudely over the door.
Inside, a counter
unbelievably cluttered, a miniature junkyard
behind which the burly proprietor sits,
an immortal in greasy coveralls
chewing on a cigar. He says
he sold his yard in Junction City
to buy this one.
Over his pocket, stitched in red,
is the one word: *Jim*.

4

Directly behind the stitching
in the chamber formed by a cage of bone
is the man's heart.
I hand him three dollars
and climb in my truck.
It's not fog
that reduces visibility now,
but streams of white fluff blown by the wind—
a snowstorm in August, each flake
a whole galaxy.
Thistledown! thistledown!

Mulling this over, I cruise down the highway.
Hands rest lightly on the wheel.
Oil changed, new plugs and points—pickup
running like a charm.

Starck provides us with evocative details of salvaging, including the yard itself and its local history moving from Junction City, Oregon, its proprietor compared to a Taoist immortal, the do-it-yourself ethic wherein the poet finds his own shock absorber bracket in the yard. And he does not neglect that goldfinch in the thistle patch.

In other poems, we see examples of Greer's "salvage society" at work, reusing what's still usable rather than manufacturing new goods. In a world with less oil, Greer says that the remains of our industrial society "represent stored energy—they embody the energy that was needed to create them, and to build the material and knowledge base that made them possible." In "Nail Bag," Appalachian poet Robert Morgan suggests how precious manufactured goods were in a time and place where they weren't easily come by:

When a cleared farm wore out or washed
in three to seven years, the soil

bleached and threadbare, they just burned the barn
down for the nails and moved on,
. . . . To the next claim. . . .
Then took out the sack
of nails like slivers of crystal
that hammered right would summon
wilderness into new structure.
As though all husbandry and home
were carried in that charred handful
of iron stitches, blacksmithed chromosomes
that link distant generations.

If no longer available, the smallest items which we take for granted now, such as nails, can become enormously important, "like slivers of crystal / that hammered right would summon / wilderness into a new structure."

Every member of a community contributes a slightly different set of skills. We would do well to shine a light on those skills to help send them into the future. As we see it, Paul Hunter summarizes our *Windfall* perspective quite admirably in part 6 of his poem "Subsistence":

No one wants to go back
to take up the hard old ways
to give the rough road we have come
more than a moment's glance
over the shoulder through
wavy glass cobwebs flyspecks

though much of that world is still there
in corners rusting unused
heaps of rank reminiscence
too much work to throw out
piled up mouldering waiting
to be examined and weighed

for what is anything worth
but the sweat I put into it
plus the gift of the soil
enough sun and rain in good time
minus what the birds eat
rabbits and squirrels their entitlement

and who cannot figure the value
of a person by what he will lend
give or help out with
should trouble come knocking
some dark night out of nowhere
with nobody's given name on it

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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