Walking and Poetry of Place

Americans have long had a love affair with roads, which seems natural in a car-centered society. Yet over millennia of poetry, roads have usually assumed travel by foot, not by automobile. Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" makes clear in the very first word of its opening lines the connection between freedom and travel by foot:

> Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
> Healthy, free, the world before me,
> The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

The speaker of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" considers a road that is "grassy" and has leaves that "no step had trodden black"—definitely a road for walking. Bashō's "The Narrow Road to the Deep North" likewise is the story of foot-travel. At *Windfall,* we encourage more poems of travel by foot about the neighborhoods where we live, work, and socialize.

Walking poems are the opposite of what at *Windfall* we call "tourist poems" or "road poems"—poems that come from behind the wheel of a car. Such poems of a fleeting, superficial view of a landscape have little to do with poetry of place. Road poems usually lack authenticating detail, especially the kinds of smells, textures, and sounds that can be experienced only by spending time in a place and interacting with its inhabitants. Road poems seldom imply the contradictory complexties of a landscape which a poet has entered into bodily. We are interested in poetry that captures the essence of place as part of the poem, rather than what can be seen from a car window while passing through.

Most contemporary walking poems of place seem to be set in the natural "green world" somewhere. It's logical to explore wilderness by foot—there are few other options for most mountainous back-country travel. But for the 81% of the American population who live in urban areas, a hike in a natural area often requires a large block of free time and driving a considerable distance. Urban walking, though, is a close-at-hand option, and a much neglected means to engendering rhythmic

poems packed with images. It might also generate poems of places connected to our lives but yet unwritten about.

Different approaches to the idea of walking may lead to different kinds of poems. Henry David Thoreau presents a most useful approach in his essay "Walking." The art of walking, Thoreau tells us, requires "a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*," a word which, he says,

> is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going *à la Sainte Terre*," to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*," a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander.

This derivation of the word, which Thoreau quotes from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (and which has been dismissed by later scholars as false etymology) captures perfectly the attitude that Thoreau and many other walking writers have found most productive: a sense of free time with all the landscape available for roving over, people to encounter here and there, and a protective cover of being on an important and sacred, even if vague, mission. The sense of leisure to consider whatever presents itself in the course of the walk makes every element of the landscape potential material for the poem.

Thoreau asserts that material enough for a lifetime is within walking distance just outside our door:

> My vicinity affords many good walks; and though for so many years I have walked almost every day, and sometimes for several days together, I have not yet exhausted them. An absolutely new prospect is a great happiness, and I can still get this any afternoon. Two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see. . . . There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you.

He goes forth expecting strangeness, and is not disappointed. For Thoreau, a walk is an attempt to meet and engage with the unknown.

It's the unexpected epiphany that as writers we're often after, and Thoreau's approach to walking seems designed to produce it.

Thoreau emphasizes roving, while Allen Ginsberg in "A Supermarket in California" emphasizes a practical purpose for a poet to have in mind for a walk: to collect images for poetry-writing. The speaker tells us that tonight he has walked "down the sidestreets under the trees" and entered a supermarket "shopping for images." What follows is an avalanche of images punctuated by exclamation marks:

> What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! —and you, García Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

The poem alternates among the very physical merchandise, people shopping, and imagined activities (induced by the speaker's "hungry fatigue," we assume) of the long-dead poets Federico García Lorca and Walt Whitman in the supermarket. One poet who diligently tried the idea of arising every day at 4:00 a.m. to write poetry discovered to her dismay that sunrises and tea kettles and other items around the kitchen were appearing far too frequently in the poems. Going on a walk to shop for images may remedy just such a problem.

Ann Staley's "Holy Saturday" in this issue illustrates how such approaches to walking fit the rhetorical ideal of *copia,* which is the accumulating of an abundance of material for a piece of writing. "For me, meaning arrives almost unbidden from an accumulation of specific details," Ted Kooser says. Staley finds her specific details at the first farmer's market of the season, where the speaker of "Holy Saturday" encounters "fresh asparagus, leeks, new potatoes, mixed greens, / Willamette Valley cheeses, mushrooms, and late-winter root vegetables," as well as Spanish ballads, rock music, CSA boxes, pearl necklaces, and undyed yarn. The compact nature of cities enables collecting an abundance of images in short space, and, as with Staley's poem, often unexpectedly juxtaposed, to create a poem.

These two attitudes—leisurely strolling and heading out on a walk with the intent to collect material for writing—seem basic principles for

poetry to arise from a walk. A massive literature of walking poems offers many models for applying the principles. One of the most longstanding of literary traditions is the poem of pilgrimage to a holy place. Such a poem usually engenders a tone of veneration, respect, and awe. We may not be going very often to the shrine of a holy blissful martyr as Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims do, but the Northwest abounds in places worthy of similar pilgrimage and respect. Barbara Drake's aptly entitled "Pilgrimage" in this issue demonstrates how one such pilgrimage might unfold as, the speakers tell us, "In May we go to the desert / to clean the ashes from our hearts." The speakers' activities seem to have religious overtones, as they "open ourselves to clear sky / and scour darkness from our thoughts." The elements of the landscape in the high desert of Harney County around Malheur Lake and Malheur Wildlife Refuge partake of the same hushed atmosphere as if performing in a ceremony: Mule deer "march by in elegant processional" and white pelicans spiral in "a ballet about life and death." The poem ascends toward one central feature of the landscape which functions as the holy site to which the pilgrimage has led, a small water-filled volcanic crater called a *maar*:

> Ascending the red slopes of Diamond Craters,
> We stare into the great maar
> Which has been holding its basin of blue water
> For eight thousand years, as if waiting
> For God to come down and drink here.

The poem concludes with the idea that such a pilgrimage enables a return to live among the very different, softer landscape of home.

Weather walks are another good starting point for poems of place. Any weather other than bland sunshine will do. Thoreau once again provides an appropriate attitude as he tells us in *Walden* that "For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms, and did my duty faithfully." Careful attention to weather can often create a specific place as well as descriptions of landscape, flora, or fauna do. Overcast, fog, mist, fog-drip, drizzle, sprinkles, showers, rain, downpours, wind, and the dozens of other possibilities of Northwest weather will do. King Lear on the heath gives a heartening example

of capturing the weather of a place in the rhythm and vocabulary of the lines:

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks. Rage, blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks.
> You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
> Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
> Singe my white head. And thou, all-shaking thunder,
> Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world,
> Crack Nature's molds, all germains spill at once,
> That makes ingrateful man.

A more local poem of storms, Robert Scott's "The Storm Walkers" in the fall 2010 *Windfall,* identifies the speaker's mother with coastal storms. The daughter of "a South Slough man," she visits "the same bay and the same ocean where her father was born and brought up." The unfolding of the poem suggests that her kinship with storms is partly genetic and partly an absorbing of her life-long environment:

> She liked to go out storm-walking
> sometimes in short spring squalls,
> although her most favorite time to go
> was during a good strong sou'wester
> blowing in gray off the mid-fall ocean.
>
> What she knew, was born and raised in:
> storms she could recognize by a drop in pressure,
> her body sensing it like a living barometer
> while she would read the warmth of breezes
> which nature sent from off wild sea waters.
> This same love of the wind she set in me early,
> forever reaching into my own deepest sloughs. . . .

Through a stormy environment, we come to understand a personality, a family history, and the deep love between a mother and adult child.

With a hotter and hotter climate and drought threatening much of the West, wet storms become all the more important. Laura L. Snyder's

"Oregon Coast in Winter" in this issue does a fine job of combining climate change and place-specific weather as the speaker of the poem longs for "socked-in views, dripping / fog, churning grey surf / with dirty, white foam" and "grounded / seagulls, hunkered down, / pointed like white weathervanes." The mind-set promoted by the travel industry favors sunny beaches, but our survival depends upon remaining conscious of what the landscape actually needs and what its "normal" is. Snyder's poem is a reminder of what we must work to preserve, a landscape that functions as it needs to.

Pacific Northwest writers have much to work with: For instance, many ways that rain falls in the Pacific Northwest have yet to be put into words. In *Of Walking in Rain,* Oregon coast writer Matt Love comments that "Rain has never fallen the same way twice and I liken its varied composition to snowflakes, fingerprints and lips. Rain virtually never falls straight to the ground on the Oregon Coast." His metaphorical descriptions of coastal rain demonstrate the possibilities: "We hit the sand and rain peppered us like a spread from a shotgun blast." "It was raining translucent silver walls." He "walked out into rain that blew like flying anvils." And finally, pointing to the task ahead: "Mist turned to rain and then rain turned to a word that English hasn't invented yet."

Besides pilgrimages and weather walks, another purpose for a walk might be to explore a particular type of terrain where we live. One common city terrain, neighborhood hills, is encouraged by urban guidebooks like *Portland Hill Walks* and *Seattle Stairway Walks* which often provide history, sociology, politics, geography, and botany of the routes. Landscapes of urban areas have often been dramatically altered by development, making for an abundance of varied terrains to explore: riverfront wharves, shorelines, railroad right-of-ways, subway tunnels, reservoirs, hilltops, zoos, downtown street grids, suburban cul-de-sacs, dedicated bicycle streets, freeway interchanges, roundabouts, warehouse districts, pedestrian malls, bridgeheads, airports, landfills, streetside rain gardens, underpasses, skate parks, amusement parks, college campuses. Yet few such places encountered unmediated, face-to-face, on foot, make it into poems submitted to *Windfall.*

Sometimes a particular city terrain needs to be questioned to prod it toward a poem. The poems in this issue of *Windfall* suggest several useful questions to ask, such as "What seems out of place in this landscape?" (Steve Dieffenbacher's "High Desert Homes"); "Who lives here?" (Martha Kreiner's "He Wanted to Die Anywhere But the Street"); "What has happened here?" (Michael McDowell's "Canemah Bluff"); "What does it mean to encounter wild animals in an urban setting?" (Bill Siverly's "Point of No Return"). Many other useful questions can often provoke a poem into being, such as "What makes this place different from any other I've seen?" or "What does this place remind me of?"

Some of these questions seem to imply that poems of place must be about the particular place of the poem. At *Windfall*, we have always considered that the poems we publish need only to recognize that the place in which the poem's action occurs plays an essential role in the otherwise non-landscape-oriented subject of the poem. It's our conviction that the landscapes in which we live inevitably influence us in myriad ways—psychologically, aesthetically, ethically, and physically. We are interested in poems that at least obliquely indicate the landscape's role in the action of the poem.

Another consideration which might make a poem of place arrive more likely from a walk is the time of day of the walk. Mary Oliver famously walks in the early morning hours. In a lecture in Portland, she described her daily life: up around a quarter to five in the morning, and out for a walk before sunrise, over the hills and through the dunes and around the ponds of Cape Cod, with a notebook in hand. In *Blue Pastures* she considers the walk as part of her writing work:

> It is dark now, not the first curve of night but the last curve: my hour. The light will soon rise out of this necessary dark. I go to my work, as I like to call it, being whimsical and serious at once. That is, to walk, and look at things, and listen, and to write down words in a small notebook. Later on, a long time later, a gathering of these words may become something I will think worth risking between the boards of another book.

It isn't a walk for exercise as much as a walk for her writing. Oliver said

that rhythm is an important element of the walk, and that she often ends up stopping and standing in a field to write. In *Long Life,* she writes, “There’s never been a day that my friends haven’t been able to say, and at a distance, ‘There’s Oliver, still standing around in the weeds. There she is, still scribbling in her notebook.’”

Commuting to a job by foot may seem a relic of the past, but is perhaps the most certain way to blend a walk into every day’s schedule. Wallace Stevens, the exemplar of the poet who commutes on foot, twice a day walked the two and a half miles between his house in Hartford and the Hartford Accident & Indemnity Company, where he worked for 39 years. Literary critic Helen Vendler says of his commute, “He enjoyed it profoundly. It was his only time out of doors, alone, thinking, receptive to the influx of nature into all the senses.” Stevens said he composed many of his poems in his head on those walks, and would write them down once he reached his office.

Robert Frost, Osip Mandelstam, and William Wordsworth also composed much of their poetry afoot. Mandelstam’s wife, Nadezhda, writes that her husband, who often walked the streets of Leningrad, “composed his verse in his head, while walking around, and only needed to sit down briefly to copy out the result.” Mandelstam considered composing a poem to be one with the physical movement of walking. In an essay on reading Dante, Mandelstam asserts that the “measure and rhythm” of walking are essential to poetry:

> The labor of reading Dante is above all endless. . . . If the first reading results only in shortness of breath and wholesome fatigue, then equip yourself for subsequent readings with a pair of indestructible Swiss boots with hobnails. The question occurs to me—and quite seriously—how many sandals did Alighieri wear out in the course of his poetic work, wandering about on the goat paths of Italy?
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> The *Inferno* and especially the *Purgatorio* glorify the human gait, the measure and rhythm of walking, the foot and its shape.
>
> The step, linked to the breathing and saturated with thought: this Dante understands as the beginning of prosody.

In a letter written on a day when William Wordsworth had been walking out doors for two hours in heavy rain, his sister Dorothy says that her brother "generally composes his verses out of doors and while he is so engaged he seldom knows how the time slips or hardly whether it is rain or fair." In wet weather, Dorothy writes, he "chooses the most sheltered spot, and there walks backwards and forwards and though the length of his walk be sometimes a quarter or half a mile, he is as fast bound within the chosen limits as if by prison walls."

It's hard to know how much the meter of such poets' poems is due to the rhythm of walking. Seamus Heaney recognizes the "almost physiological operations of a poet composing and the music of the finished poem," seeing for Wordsworth "the crunch and scuffle of the gravel working like a metre or a metronome under the rhythms of the ongoing chaunt." The poem's relationship to the poet's physically engaged body may be responsible for much of the harmonious rhythm of poetry by walkers. Poetry-composing walks give the opportunity to experiment with how the movement of a poem can match the movement of the writer's body over the varying terrain of the walking route—another way of incorporating the landscape into a poem.

In a city, the noon hour's increase in street activity can sometimes work exceptionally well for walking poems. Frank O'Hara's poems of his New York walks during his lunch break from his job at the Museum of Modern Art produced many poems of his book *Lunch Poems*. In "A Step Away from Them," O'Hara describes and comments as he goes:

> It's my lunch hour, so I go
> for a walk among the hum-colored
> cabs. First, down the sidewalk
> where laborers feed their dirty
> glistening torsos sandwiches
> and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
> on. They protect them from falling
> bricks, I guess.

As might be expected with O'Hara, we get product names, names of particular people, and especially the times and places of events and

his experiences. He delights in the encounters: "Neon in daylight is a / great pleasure"; "There are several Puerto / Ricans on the avenue today, which / makes it beautiful and warm." Specifically named people enter the poems not because the speaker meets them during the walk, but because something on the walk reminds O'Hara of them; the walk provokes the poet's imagination and memory to write a poem.

Evening and night also have produced a disproportionate number of walking poems. In "Acquainted with the Night," Robert Frost writes of a night-time walk almost as an antidote to anxiety:

> I have walked out in the rain—and back in rain.
> I have outwalked the furthest city light.
>
> I have looked down the saddest city lane.
> I have passed by the watchman on his beat
> And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
>
> I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
> When far away an interrupted cry
> Came over houses from another street.

The walk is a means to gather sensory impressions—rain, streetlights, the sound of his own feet—and also to encounter other people, as with the watchman and whoever has uttered the "interrupted cry." The time of day alters the characteristics of the streets and determines the kind of people likely to be encountered on a walk. In "Good Hours," Frost describes a winter evening walk, past "cottages in a row / Up to their shining eyes in snow." Once again, sounds as well as visuals function as images as we're told of the music of a violin coming from one house and of his own "creaking feet" over the snow.

It might be objected that night-time walks limit the sensory images that place-poetry thrives on. In darkness, the colors of the spectrum have often turned to just gray, white, and black, and details have disappeared. But the lack of colors and visual detail doesn't mean the loss of all sensory images; darkness may simply shift our attention to other senses. An example of how that might work is stanza five of John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale":

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
   Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
   Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
   White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
      Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
         And mid-May's eldest child,
   The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
      The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

In the first lines the speaker lets us know that we're not going to be getting visual descriptions because in the darkness he cannot see the flowers at his feet or on the boughs of the trees around him. Instead, he will "guess each sweet" from its contribution to the "soft incense" of the "embalmed darkness." He begins with a sweep of what he will identify from underfoot to overhead, starting with "the grass" and moving up to the "the thicket" and then higher yet to the "fruit-tree wild." More specific identifications by smell follow: "white hawthorn," "pastoral eglantine," "fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves," and "the coming musk-rose." We experience the place through the odors.

Taking a walk in the neighborhoods in which we're living our lives can invigorate the poetry we write and provide endless new topics. A walk connects us directly with the real, physical, unmediated world. No screens, no central heating, air-conditioning, thermal window glass, or automobile metal separates us from the greater world. Walking slows us down and connects us to basics. All our senses are inevitably engaged: Cooking smells of lemon and garlic, the beep of trucks in reverse, the texture of a breeze, mosquitoes and gnats and sweat on our skin, the feel of cobblestones and curbs underfoot, snatches of overheard conversation, birdsong and squirrel chatter, rain and wind, all tell us that we are in a real, specific place. The exercise as we walk sends more oxygen to our brains than if we were sitting, which in turn is likely to increase our alertness and attention to what we're encountering. The kinetic and public nature of walking increase the

likelihood of interactions with others that might develop into material for dynamic poetry.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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