

Place Names in Poetry of Place

At *Windfall*, we receive many poems that we are unlikely to publish for lack of specific authenticating detail about place. We often get generic poems about “the Oregon Coast” or about “the forest” or about anonymous towns or other locations. Poets sometimes imagine that being too specific about place will alienate readers, or not allow readers to project their own experiences into the poem. Or, the poet may not yet have focused attention closely enough on the place itself. Many so-called “road poems” or travel poems are diminished precisely because they lack a really informed sense of place such as a native or inhabitant would possess. The outsider point of view may be surprising to a native, but its very outsidership is inherently limited, unsubstantiated by local awareness of particular history and context. The best source for poems of place is the place where the poet lives or has lived. Looking into local experience closely is the source of authenticating detail. Poems of place makes use of detail in a number of ways, all of which we have come to appreciate at *Windfall*, and we continue to invite poems evocative of human activity in particular places in the Pacific Northwest.

The most immediate form of authenticating detail is place names. James Wright, in his groundbreaking 1963 book *The Branch Will Not Break*, published a poem that has been often anthologized: “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota.” Readers, when asked if they have ever been to Pine Island, Minnesota, or if they know who William Duffy might be, usually say no (except for the occasional outlier who has actually been to Pine Island). Then we have to consider: Can we still appreciate the poem if we don’t personally know the specifically named place and person? The common answer is “yes,” because the specificity of the names create the impression of authenticity.

Specific place names in the poem do not prevent the reader from identifying with the place—quite the opposite. As readers we grant the poet his or her experience, which happens uniquely in place and time.

We actually identify more with that actuality than we would with a more generic title, like "Lying in a Hammock at a Farm." Some readers may identify with the generic version, but with the specific names, the poet gains both the reader's identification with the occasion and the unique lyricism of the names themselves.

For an account of the lyricism of names, we turn to a writer of lyrical prose fiction, Marcel Proust. In his novel *Swann's Way*, the magisterial last section is titled "Place-Names: The Name."

The name of Parma, one of the towns that I most longed to visit after reading the *Chartreuse*, seeming to me compact, smooth, violet-tinted and soft, if anyone were to speak of such or such a house in Parma in which I should be lodged, he would give me the pleasure of thinking that I was to inhabit a dwelling that was compact, smooth, violet-tinted and soft, that bore no relation to the houses in any other town in Italy, since I could imagine it only by the aid of that heavy first syllable of the name of Parma, in which no breath of air stirs, and of all that I had made it assume of Stendahl's sweetness and the reflected hue of violets.

The speaker Marcel in Proust's novel brings to the place name "Parma" his reading of Stendahl's novel, *The Charterhouse of Parma*. However, allusion aside, Proust captures the lyrical associations that a place name like "Parma" can have for us. That is, place names themselves bring unique music to a whole poem or stanza or line in poetry. For example, Bill Siverly's poem "Prelude: Inheritance," begins with this stanza:

The Siverly farm lay on a flood plain between the Iowa and
Mississippi,
rich bottom land near the village of Oakville, where my father
was born.

Uncle Dwight took over raising corn after his siblings had gone to other lives in Idaho, San Francisco, Wapello, and Muscatine.

The literal accuracy of the dispersal of the Siverlys aside, the last line is knitted together by a music that place names can effectively deliver: The long “o” sound at the ends of the names Idaho, San Francisco and Wapello finds counterpoint in the sonic outlier “Muscatine.” Another kind of music in the line is heard in the diversity of the places so named: Idaho (state), San Francisco (big city) Wapello, Iowa (small town of 2,000), Muscatine, Iowa (mid-sized town, 22,000). The places of diverse size, both far and near, are linked by sounds and simply appearing in the line together: The dispersed Siverlys are the link to the differing land- and cityscapes. The immediate origin of the family is also identified in the stanza by place names: the land between the Iowa and Mississippi Rivers and the village of Oakville, Iowa (today’s population: 173).

Beyond sound and other associations, specific place names promise something unique in a poem that generic designations cannot supply. Since the poet has committed a poem to a specific place, the poet is also indicating that something that only happens here is about to be revealed. We are made privy to an episode or perspective in the speaker’s own life, deeply associated with the place where the episode or perspective arose. Even when a poem is titled with a place name, the poet is not claiming responsibility to represent the place in its entirety—only insofar as the poet’s experience reflects a particular aspect of the place. Such a reflection can still be accurate about the place at hand.

After the death of her friend and fellow poet in 1977, Elizabeth Bishop wrote a poem with the epigraph *In memoriam: Robert Lowell*. The title of the poem is “North Haven,” after the island off the coast of Maine, but the epigraph already limits what Bishop will have to show about North Haven. The poem will say something to and about Lowell through the imagery of this place. Though Lowell and Bishop met in other nearby locales, such as Stonington, Maine, Bishop stayed in North Haven alone after Lowell’s death. The first stanza, the only one printed in italics, describes the island to Lowell and to us from Bishop’s perspective:

*I can make out the rigging of a schooner
a mile off; I can count
the new cones on the spruce. It is so still
the pale bay wears a milky skin, the sky
no clouds, except for one long, carded horse's-tail.*

The speaker can make out details far off, such as the rigging of a schooner and cones on a spruce, and then expands her vision to take in the bay that is a living thing with a "milky skin," and then an empty sky with one cloud, a "carded horse's-tail." The carding, or combing, gives a metaphorical touch to the cirrus cloud, aka a horse's-tail.

In the third stanza, Bishop presents the island's floral display, which she and Lowell would each have seen separately:

This month, our favorite one is full of flowers:
Buttercups, Red Clover, Purple Vetch,
Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied, Eyebright,
the Fragrant Bedstraw's incandescent stars,
and more, returned, to paint the meadows with delight.

"One" in the first line refers to island of North Haven. The flowers are assigned their common names, though the term "Daisies pied," as well as the last phrase of the stanza, "to paint the meadows with delight," come from a song "When Daisies Pied and Violets Blue," in Shakespeare's play *Love's Labors Lost*.

That Bishop was a stickler for accuracy in poems was asserted in her letter to Lowell in 1962 responding to his poem "Water," which began with the line, "It was a Maine fishing town," probably referring to Stonington, Maine. Bishop wrote: "I can't tell a lie even for art, apparently; it takes an awful effort or a sudden jolt to make me alter facts. Shouldn't it be a *lobster* town . . . ?" Lowell agreed and made the change. Bishop's insistence on accuracy in poems is remarkable, because a common assumption about poets is that they do not have to be as accurate as a botanist would be viewing the same meadow of flowers. However, accurate naming of flowers is like the accurate

naming of places: The music of names and their specificity to place grant authenticity to the poem. The colors of the flowers in Bishop's stanza—yellow buttercups, red clover, purple vetch, yellow or orange hawkweed, white daisies, white eyebright, and white bedstraw—paint a vision of delight indeed, for a poet as sensitive to colors as Bishop was, and for us readers as well.

In the fourth stanza of "North Haven" Bishop turns to naming the birds, who, like the flowers, have made their vernal return to the island:

The Goldfinches are back, or others like them,
and the White-throated Sparrow's five-note song,
pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.
Nature repeats herself, or almost does:
repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.

Goldfinches are named, or "others like them"—the yellow warbler, for example, is often mistaken for a goldfinch. For the white-throated sparrow, Bishop projects a song that evokes human pleading, associated with grief for or particular memories of Lowell. The birdsong leads to the last line of the stanza, which is often read as reflecting Lowell's poetic practice as a fierce reviser of his work. As with flowers, the particular birdlife of North Haven is brought to bear in the interests of the poem.

An intervening stanza evokes Lowell's youthful (in 1932) experience on North Haven of discovering girls. As we have seen, both the flowers and the birds are said to return, underlining the fact that Lowell is dead and will not return, which is the theme of the final stanza of the poem:

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
afloat in mystic blue . . . And now—you've left
for good. You can't derange, or re-arrange,
your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.)
The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.

Sparrows might change their song, but Lowell's poems are, like him, beyond change. North Haven itself remains, anchored but afloat,

a haven for memory, grief, and sadness. The place itself becomes a memorial to Bishop's long friendship with Lowell.

As we have seen, Elizabeth Bishop devotes an entire stanza of "New Haven" to the flowers that emerge each spring on the island. Barbara Drake, who lives with her husband Bill Beckman on a twenty-acre farm near Yamhill, Oregon, takes this a step further. Drake devotes an entire poem to the seasonal cycle of blooming plants on different parts of her property, beginning with omlaria, which blooms in March. The farm is named after the road in Yamhill County where it's located, Lilac Hill Road:

LILAC HILL FARM

First is the omlaria,
also known as Indian plum
and then the sandhill plums
pink and white.

Here comes the erythronium, aka
yellow dogtooth violet or fawn lily,
and the pink trout lilies.
Now the chocolate lily blooms
yellow and brown,
and in low wet places
the camas, a deep purplish blue.
Wild iris appear in the woods,
yellow violets, and the shooting star . . .

Wild roses perfume the air
even before they bloom,
the deep pink Nootka rose, the rose
that is almost white, the pink
with a white eye, all wild roses.
And now the flax
shows up pale blue in the grass.
The orange columbine and the blue lupine

bloom on the bank at the bottom of the place
dangerously mingled with poison oak pollinating.

As each one goes
another comes on, the vetch and the clover,
the creamy white death camas
and the pink checker mallows
at the edge of the woods,
the blue-eyed grass
in the seeps of the vineyard,
the tiny white orchids in the shade
at the top of the pasture.

Now the elegant brodiaea,
a cone of blue in the ochre grass,
and the fool's onion, another brodiaea,
and the pink Hooker's onion
and onions with dark red corms
at the top. There are the late
obscure pink flowers, waxy and small,
which I can't find the name of.

The mule's ears bloom
in the hottest places.

The tiny yellow monkey flowers
smell like grass, and the lomatium
swallowtail larvae feed on
decorates the south-facing slope
of the sheep pasture.

Now the grasses themselves,
past bloom, drop their seeds.
Now the flower of the Queen Anne's lace
floats above the pasture, and chicory,
blue as gaslight or a blind eye,
blooms along the roadside.

Soon it will be all finished again.
The plums will fall, the berries will dry,
the sharp and clinging seeds disperse
and the mushrooms sprout
their fruits in the autumn rain.
What does it all mean?
It is just an old story
the farm tells over and over.

In this poem Drake equates the farm itself with the spring-summer-fall succession of blooming plants. The major parts of the farm are enumerated and accounted for: "low wet places," "the woods," "the bank at the bottom of the place," "at the edge of the woods," "in the seeps of the vineyard," "at the top of the pasture," "in the ochre grass," "the south-facing slope of the sheep pasture," "above the pasture," and "along the roadside." To produce such a deep appreciation of place in a poem, you would have to know that place very well. You would have to have lived on Lilac Hill Farm long enough to have become intimately familiar with the succession of blooming plants. And most of all, you would have to have a botanical knowledge of the different plants, their names, and their provenance. As this poem and many of her other poems of life on the farm show, Drake possesses all of these characteristics in abundance.

Drake's presence in the poem is one of observation and appreciation of what is observed. Poems of place require some form of human presence or activity, because these are what makes a place interesting to us. Consider the human interaction in Clem Starck's poem in the town Rickreall, Oregon:

RICKREALL

Marge is in charge of Parts & Service
at Rickreall Farm Supply,
and it's just possible
she knows everything you'd ever want to know
about Kubota tractors.

So, on a sunny afternoon in June,
while the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq drag on
and revolutionary fervor sweeps across North Africa,
I'm on my way to Rickreall
to consult with Marge
about my tractor. The gearshift for the PTO
is jammed.

Immediately she brings up an exploded view
on her computer screen
and pinpoints
the likely cause.

She looks a little like my mother,
and come to think of it,
my mother's name was Marge.

"Rickreall," by the way, is pronounced "RICK-ree-awl,"
a corruption, some say,
of *Le Créole*, "The Creole," referring
to an early traveler drowned at a ford in the creek—
Rickreall Creek.
But this is disputed.

For a time, because of its large number of Southern
sympathizers,
the place was called "Dixie."

Nowadays, there's not much else to Rickreall
besides Rickreall Farm Supply
with its showroom and lot full of bright orange tractors,
and Marge, of course,
behind the counter.

The human dimensions of the poem are mainly supplied by the speaker and Marge. As noted previously, naming a poem after a place does not commit the poet to taking responsibility for the entire place, but

mainly his or her presence or activity in that place. In the poem, Starck's speaker goes to Rickreall to consult Marge about his malfunctioning power takeoff (PTO) on his tractor. But he also takes the occasion to present some history of the unincorporated village of Rickreall (current population 77): the traditional story of how the place got its name and the alternative name "Dixie." These bits of history about the place name lend an air of authenticity that makes room for Starck's assertion that "there's not much else to Rickreall." The history also allows him to locate his relation to the place in the present time: the human connection to Marge, who not only understands the problem with the tractor, but even resembles the speaker's mother. As the last line of the poem affirms, from the speaker's point of view (and by now, ours), Marge behind the counter is the essence of the place called Rickreall.

The name of the place may not necessarily occur in a poem's title, but can be delayed until later in the poem itself, where it might occur almost incidentally. Michael McDowell titles the following poem after inclement weather, in the manner of a newspaper headline:

ICE STORM PARALYZES CITY

Poets hope for extremes in weather—
it's part of the job.

Sure, sure, antennae of the race,
speaking the eternal verities,
poets yearn for spring.

But spring comes too soon and too easily.
Daffodils now in February,
and Portland still hasn't had a big snow,
a big freeze and silver thaw.
We haven't yet known we're alive

by seeing the world's heart stop:
the crack and whoosh of a fallen branch
too loaded with ice to hold,

the rifle-shot cry of wood too cold
to stay silent—

We hope for the brittle hard world of legendary winter
to stop commerce and the quotidian
and in the deathly tranquil city to tell us:
Look at your breath: You, are, alive.
Look at how little you need to survive.

The poem, with understated humor, attempts to make a virtue of bad weather. While poets traditionally seek the “eternal verities” of resurgent spring, winter imposes a deathly tranquility on the city. Ironically, it is winter, rather than spring, that makes us feel alive. Ice storms may occur in many different cities, but the speaker accounts only for Portland, where McDowell lives. There is a subtle reference to climate change in its local guise, with “Daffodils now in February” and the fact that there had been no ice storm yet this winter, as customary in past winters. The speaker is apparently nostalgic for “legendary winters” in all their icy glory, letting us know that we are alive and “how little we need to survive.” The city gone quiet means fewer resources consumed, less greenhouse gas emitted, that much less contributed to global warming and climate change, with the bonus that cold teaches us that we are alive. McDowell interprets climate change locally in Portland, so the particular place becomes crucial to the meaning of the poem. Though published in 2011 in McDowell’s book, *The Hundred-Year House*, the poem reflects the weather in the winter of 2016–2017, when Portland experienced a “legendary winter” indeed, one ice and snow event after another.

McDowell subsumes his individual speaker’s voice within a “we” that represents the voice of citizens of Portland in general. The absence or indirection of the speaker’s voice is often a feature of the poetry of place, as the place itself assumes central importance in the poem. Penelope Scambly Schott subsumes the speaker’s voice entirely in a poem set in Dufur, Oregon, from her 2013 book, *Lovesong for Dufur*. The town is not named until the third stanza:

ON THE WESTERNMOST EDGE OF EAST

At the farthest east edge of the Mount Hood forest,
high over Fifteenmile Creek, an open spot on the ridge:
long view of the home valley, past the last stand of trees,
toward rows of golden hills in the country of dry wheat.

At the east end of the valley past dwindling ponderosas,
a tidy march of pear trees crests the rise, and two lines
of crowded cottonwoods squeeze the moving creek
past Ramsey Grange, down, gently now, down, through
the Dufur Valley on into town, small houses clustered
between hand-planted trees, hedges and lawns, the green
of good intentions, churches and school, post office flag,
hardware and grocery store, just one bar. Here in Dufur,
ranchers and wheat farmers drink coffee. Up in the fields,
cows munch wheat stubble. And this morning Mount Hood
glows freshly white, rising higher than silver grain elevators,
than meadowlark song in June, into a wide and perfect sky.

Everyplace is someplace, but this is where places meet.
Stop. From here you almost feel the planet rolling east.

Schott's speaker offers us a panoramic view of Dufur Valley, which is summarized in the first stanza: The forested edge of the Mount Hood forest meets the golden hills of wheat stretching into characteristic landscape of Eastern Oregon, establishing the theme of the poem that in this place West meets East. The speaker then takes us down Fifteenmile Creek, down the valley slopes into the town of Dufur (population 604), small enough to be summarized in one picturesque stanza. The poem then sweeps out of town to the east, with a second reference to Mount Hood as the starting point where Eastern Oregon begins. The final couplet redefines: "this is where places meet." In the last line, the poem elevates the perspective so that we feel the entire planet rolling east.

Schott gives us a quintessential poem of place, in which the place name Dufur is almost incidental, but also essential for us to realize the geographical dimensions and the sense of wonder as our humble location rolls with the moving earth.

Place names in the poetry of place come from a long tradition. Here is a poem by Wang An-Shih (1021-1086) about an occasion and kind of place often evoked in ancient Chinese poetry: paying one's respects at a grave-shrine, for which the poem is named:

CLIMBING UP TO TREASURE-MASTER'S GRAVE-SHRINE

At pine gates, exhausted houseboy and horse refuse to go on.
I take my walking-stick of burl-gnarl bamboo, trust root-stone

and a river moon arcing into emptiness. It's bright as midday.
Mountain clouds drift shadow everywhere, dusk smoldering.

A racket of busy squirrels scatters among the silence of peaks.
Crows grow faint in outland cold, shadows looking into flight.

Here in the midst of all this, I can't tell who is guest, who host:
This old master's forgotten me utterly, and I've forgotten
words.

In a note to this poem, the translator David Hinton says, "Treasure-Master was an illustrious monk from the sixth century" (four hundred years before the occasion of this poem). Hinton explains two different understandings of the terms "guest" and "host" in the Chinese equivalent of Zen, called "Ch'an," which is Buddhist thought within a pre-existing Taoist framework: "Treasure-Master is the host, as it is his grave-shrine, and Wang An-Shih is the guest. But this is enriched by two Ch'an uses of the terms: first, host as teacher, and guest as student; and second, host as one's original nature or empty consciousness, and guest as one's everyday mind with its thoughts and memories."

Here the poem of place becomes a vehicle for an insight into the nature of things: The poet-speaker leaves the houseboy behind and goes alone to follow the stone and the moon into emptiness. Wang An-

Shih was well-retired when he wrote this poem, so his walking stick is burl-gnarl bamboo, which probably stands for the old man himself. And yet, he has more energy than the exhausted houseboy! Emptiness is that state in Ch'an thought that is the origin of all things of this world, and, therefore, a state to which all sages aspire to achieve. Other Taoist images include the mountain, suggesting the permanence of origins, and dusk, because the source of all things is not only empty, but dark. Dark crows in flight suggest emergence from origins. The poet, in good Buddhist fashion, merges with this process and becomes unable to tell host from guest. In the last line the old master did the right thing in Taoist terms in "forgetting" the student. In turn, the student Wang An-Shih has "forgotten the words," because as Lao Tzu puts it in the first verse of the *Tao Te Ching*, "The way that can be told / Is not the constant way." The Tao lies beyond words. This is a poem in which the speaker essentially cancels himself. Indeed, a poet can do no more to subsume the individual voice in the service of place than to disappear behind the origin of all things!

Few poets today would need to go so far as to absent themselves entirely from their poems. However, poets can always pay honor to the dead, which often leads to meditation on the nature of existence. In China, many grave-shrines are preserved by which poets and sages are remembered. The poet-translator Bill Porter (Red Pine) published in 2016 a book of his recent travels in China for the purpose of visiting grave-shrines of famous Chinese poets: *Finding Them Gone: Visiting Chinese Poets of the Past*.

This afterword by no means exhausts the possibilities of naming specific places in poem of place. Many poems we have published in *Windfall* are evidence of this, and we at *Windfall* are certain that the inventiveness of poets in the Pacific Northwest can offer many more ways to use place names. What does the name of your town mean? Therein lies a poem—maybe more than one!

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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