Afterword

Political Poetry of Place

Much of the poetry *Windfall* publishes demonstrates the importance of preserving and protecting natural as well as built places which might otherwise be degraded, damaged, or destroyed. Yet we receive few poems that are overtly political. In this time of heightened political activity, it's appropriate to consider writing political poems of place.

A number of circumstances compel more political writing about landscapes. The current occupant of the White House asked the Secretary of the Interior to review twenty-seven national monuments that recent past presidents set aside for special protection, including Oregon's Cascade-Siskiyou and Washington's Hanford Reach, with the goal of shrinking the monuments' size or abolishing the monument status so that private interests might use the land for their profit. In addition, climate change is well underway altering landscapes, while many in positions of power, both corporate and government, continue to deny that humans have had any role in causing it or that we should work to reduce the severity of its damage to the natural world. Skyrocketing housing prices in urban areas are leading to housing developments in flood-prone areas and in scarce urban wild areas. Moreover, the growth of fundamentalism in religion, politics, and science raises daily challenges to the most undeniable truths. Social media has demonstrated its ability to spread convincing untruths far and wide. Added to these circumstances is the accelerating wealth inequality which has the effect of giving more political power to the very rich and giving fewer life choices to the rest of us. Since November 2016, many people have expressed feelings of hopelessness and depression and lessened creativity.

While poetry may not be the most powerful political tool in today's America, it can be especially effective in ways that other writing isn't. If poetry is "the best words in the best order" as Coleridge says, then it's more likely to be remembered, and it's more likely to be quoted and repeated beyond the poem itself. Poetry also gives insights of a nature

that prose can't. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant— / Success in Circuit lies," Emily Dickinson tells us. "The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind—." Poetry can be more effective than a barrage of insults, "alternative facts," and "fake news."

The drawbacks to writing political poetry should be acknowledged at the outset. First, political poetry is typically transient. Particularly when it's about temporary issues that become resolved, it doesn't often survive the test of time. On the other hand, political poetry that emphasizes the values beyond the issues tends to survive, as for instance Blake's poems of chimney sweeps which identify "mind-forg'd manacles" and religious piety as larger issues enabling mistreatment of children. Another problem with political poetry is that too often it makes sense only to an audience who already understand the political context of the poem. Such misunderstanding can be avoided by providing adequate context at some point in the poem, or again by connecting to a more general issue. The most common problem is that the politics often overwhelms the poetry. The poem becomes more polemical than poetic. At this point, the writer had better move to prose, which has rhetorical structures better suited to argument than poetry does.

One effective approach to writing a political poem of place is to return to someplace you once knew well, particularly a childhood haunt, and to employ a "then/now" structure in which the first half of the poem recreates the place as you once knew it, and the second presents it as it is today. Usually no comment is necessary at the conclusion—the facts speak for themselves. One of the most disconcerting characteristics of our time is our historical amnesia: As a culture, we don't remember how places once were, and what has been lost. Robinson Jeffers' many years of residence in the same place in Carmel, California, enabled his "then/now" meditative poem "Carmel Point," which begins:

> The extraordinary patience of things!
> This beautiful place defaced with a crop of suburban houses—
> How beautiful when we first beheld it,
> Unbroken field of poppy and lupin walled with clean cliffs;

No intrusion but two or three horses pasturing,
Or a few milch cows rubbing their flanks on the outcrop rock-
heads—
Now the spoiler has come:

How can we see what is no longer there, especially if we weren't around to experience it long ago? Charles Goodrich's poem "Touched" presents the effect of some environmental changes on a particularly attuned person:

All summer he roams
the leftover woods, his hands
achy and cramped. He claims
that clawing huckleberries into his mouth
loosens the pain of the absence of bear.

I've seen him batting his eyes like crazy
in a garden without butterflies,
and sometimes his lips start twitching
as if he's trying to whistle a precise trill,
but even he can't tell what songbird it is
that no longer visits our town.

The poem's other stanzas present the effects of other missing essentials of a complete landscape. With plenty of particular details, the poem needs no lofty abstract statements, which typically sink a political poem into mediocrity. Of course, only those who know what a landscape once held can write such poems. Newcomers often seen nothing wrong, and need to be enlightened.

Another approach to writing a political poem of place is to present a recent event that brings a problem into focus. Margaret Chula's "Oil Train Derailment" about the June 3, 2016, disaster in Mosier, Oregon, juxtaposes the ordinary life of Mosier with an extraordinary disaster. The initial observations create a summer's day picture: "figs ripen too soon / and drop / their soggy pulp / . . . wind surfers gather / on the banks / of the Columbia / hoping for a gust. / Mothers sit outside the

ice cream shop / licking cones, / waiting / for their children / to get out of school." Chula presents the disaster in an equally matter-of-fact tone, which emphasizes how easily such a derailment could become part of the day: "At noon, / the sound / of the train whistle / as it rounds the bend / and then / a deeper sound, / like an empty well / as, one by one, / sixteen oil cars / tip over sideways / and three burst / into flames." The last stanza remains in the physical world, presenting the next stages of the disaster: "Black oil / smothers / the orange poppies, / snakes / along the ground, / slithers into / the cold river." The concluding images present a vivid look at consequences of the derailment, eliminating the need for any explanation or authorial voice condemning oil trains running along rivers and through small towns. The metaphor of the oil as a snake that slithers and destroys flowers echoes that original snake in the garden of Eden. As long as oil trains continue to roll through the Columbia River Gorge, this could be our future as well as our recent past. The poem demonstrates another quality of effective political poetry: It employs narration, telling a story of before, during, and after the derailment.

Often there's no disaster to focus attention on a problem. In that case, a poem might describe an undesirable, unfair, or unethical status quo. In the title poem of her book *Full Moon on the Reservation*, Gloria Bird, a member of the Spokane Tribe, presents different kinds of dangers this landscape holds:

> Full Moon on the Reservation
> Breaking above Cottonwood Ridge
> the full winter moon
> casts a protective skin
> over deer nesting
> beneath snow-ladened branches
> of tamarack and pine.
> Snow is blue in this light,
> and the gambling spirit gathers up
> from the edges of highway

cutting through the heart
of the reservation, winding down
the Canyon road, past Cold Springs
and on, ice in its wake as black
as the outline of trees,
and dangerous.

It is on nights like these
primordial and full of the mysteries
of Indian land that we are caught,
deluded into thinking that we are immortal
as *suyapis*, driven careless as fools,
arrogant as hell into snowbanks and fists
of rage. Racing back over icy roads
from Springdale or Snake Town
we used to be safe from police
once we crossed the rickety bridge
onto reservation land, but not anymore.
We will never be safe
breathing decaying
radioactive air, betting
for sticks on the lives
of our children's children.
We are players in this dwindling game:
bones hidden in the scarf
tied around the neck of the moon
extend out from her ivory hand.
We choose. Sometimes we win,
stakes high, or we lose
another piece of ourselves, again.

We see that the greatest danger, greater than icy roads and off-reservation police, greater than the Indians' "gambling spirit" and deluded thinking, is "breathing decaying / radioactive air," which will continue to harm every subsequent generation. Bird's expertise

at using poetic technics prevents the politics from overshadowing the poetry: exact and accurate particulars of landscape (deer nest where they would typically nest, beneath branches of not just "trees" but tamarack and pine; snow appears blue in the full winter moonlight; a bridge is "rickety"); syllepsis ("driven . . . into snowbanks and fists of rage"); place names that both describe and create atmosphere (Cottonwood Ridge, Canyon road, Cold Springs, Springdale, Snake Town); alliteration ("gambling spirit gathers up"; Canyon road past Cold Springs; fists of / rage. Racing back"; "rickety bridge / onto the reservation"); metaphor and simile drawn from elements of the scene (the moon casts a protective skin over deer; ice is as black as the outline of trees; all these dangers part of a "dwindling game"); personification (the moon wears a scarf around "her" neck, and extends an ivory hand); and unifying dominant imagery (moon, snow and ice, gambling). The poem doesn't preach or complain, as less effective political poetry does, but rather says: This is how it is. Perhaps most significantly, Bird expertly avoids the tendency in political poetry to polarize or assign blame, and says, "We choose."

A political poem of place might also address a particular government or business policy that has caused extensive problems. The early nineteenth-century "ploughman" poet John Clare illustrates the effects of England's enclosure laws on the countryside in poems such as "Lament of Swordy Well," "Moors," and "The Village Minstrel." In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a series of acts by Parliament removed much of the land that from time immemorial had been common land, available to members of local communities for farming and grazing, and gave it over for exclusive use by local landowners. In the eighty-line poem "Remembrances," Clare names many specific places, describing them as they were before and after enclosure. He describes exactly what has happened, and names the policy responsible, in this typical stanza:

> By Langley Bush I roam, but the bush hath left its hill;
> On Cowper Green I stray, 'tis a desert strange and chill;

And spreading Lea Close Oak, ere decay had penned its will,
To the axe of the spoiler and self-interest fell a prey;
And Crossberry Way and old Round Oak's narrow lane
With its hollow trees like pulpits, I shall never see again:
Enclosure like a Bonaparte let not a thing remain,
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill
And hung the moles for traitors—though the brook is running still,
It runs a naked stream, cold and chill.

Every line presents a specific image or action tied to an exact place, which vouches for the accuracy and truthfulness of the speaker. The natural elements of the landscape are presented in human metaphors and similes, suggesting the close bonds the local people had with the landscape before being forced out by enclosure: An oak has had its will written; the hollow trees were like pulpits before enclosure; the removal of vegetation leaves the stream "naked"; the moles are hung as if traitors. The enclosure laws themselves are likened to Napoleon, who in recent memory had waged destructive wars across all Europe.

A political poem of place might begin by asking questions of seemingly settled issues about how we treat the landscape. Certainty and strong one-sided assertions in a political poem tend to close the ears of those who need to consider the poem's point of view. Robert Frost's 1923 poem "A Brook in a City" demonstrates a questioning approach to what readers at the time likely considered a non-issue. Most of us are grateful for storm water systems that channel water away from our basements and low-lying streets. For hundreds of years, cities have put urban creeks in pipes underground to allow development of the most convenient land. But questioning can increase the complexity of our understanding of common practices:

A Brook in a City
The farm house lingers, though averse to square
With the new city street it has to wear
A number in. But what about the brook

That held the house as in an elbow-crook?
I ask as one who knew the brook, its strength
And impulse, having dipped a finger length
And made it leap my knuckle, having tossed
A flower to try its currents where they crossed.
The meadow grass could be cemented down
From growing under pavements of a town;
The apple trees be sent to hearth-stone flame.
Is water wood to serve a brook the same?
How else dispose of an immortal force
No longer needed? Staunch it at its source
With cinder loads dumped down? The brook was thrown
Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
In fetid darkness still to live and run—
And all for nothing it had ever done,
Except forget to go in fear perhaps.
No one would know except for ancient maps
That such a brook ran water. But I wonder
If from its being kept forever under,
The thoughts may not have risen that so keep
This new-built city from both work and sleep.

Frost animates his landscape, and gives evidence of how he has come to his empathy for the creek. He imputes emotions to both house (which is "averse" to wearing a house number) and creek (which did nothing wrong except "forget to go in fear"). He asks questions on their behalf and wonders about negative psychological effects on humans of throwing brooks into "sewer dungeons." Almost a hundred years later, we're hearing those questions. Academics are studying the psychological benefits of even the slightest exposure to nature in an urban environment, and, recognizing additional reasons for keeping creeks above ground, cities are beginning to "daylight" creeks currently in pipes. What other commonly accepted landscape practices need questioning?

Two final ways to approach writing a political poem of place are to look to the distant past or to the distant future. Looking to the past, former Oregon Poet Laureate Lawson Fusao Inada's poem "Healing Gila" considers the land of one internment camp to which Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 sent thousands of Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II: the Gila River War Relocation Center on the Gila River Indian Reservation southeast of Phoenix, Arizona. The poem, with its epigraph *"for The People,"* considers the history of the land and the people who have lived on it:

HEALING GILA

for The People

The people don't mention it much.
It goes without saying,
it stays without saying—

that concentration camp
on their reservation.

And they avoid that massive site
as they avoid contamination—

that massive void
punctuated by crusted nails,
punctured pipes, crumbled
failings of foundations . . .

What else is there to say?

This was a lush land once,
graced by a gifted people
gifted with the wisdom
of rivers, seasons, irrigation.

The waters went flowing
through a network of canals

in the delicate workings
of balances and health . . .

What else is there to say?

Then came the nation.
Then came the death.

Then came the desert.
Then came the camp.

But the desert is not deserted.
It goes without saying,
it stays without saying—

wind, spirits, tumbleweeds, pain.

Most people have forgotten or repressed America's shameful episode of running concentration camps interning its own citizens, if they ever learned about them; at any rate, we don't talk about them. But to heal, the wrongs must be addressed. The tribes on the reservation didn't want a "war relocation center" located on their land, and the Japanese-Americans didn't want to be imprisoned there. Inada's history is succinct: a "gifted people" lived there (the Akimel O'odham [formerly known as Pima] and the Pee-Posh [formerly known as Maricopa]). It became part of the United States in the Gadsden Purchase in the 1850s, and as the waters of the Gila River were diverted by white settlers upriver of the Indian communities and the river ran dry, Indian agriculture ceased and many Akimel and Pee-Posh died of starvation as well as diseases: "Then came the nation. / Then came the death." The tribal areas became "the desert," and in 1942 the federal government imposed "the camp" upon the reservation. One of the most useful techniques in writing political poems is to ask questions, as Inada does repeatedly: "What else is there to say?" Once we consider the facts the speaker has been presenting, we might understand the repeated statement "It goes without saying" as the central problem, since there

is so much that needs to be said about such injustice.

Imagining the future is one of the more intriguing possibilities for political poems. Charles Goodrich offers a vision of the future in this poem:

> The Uber-Rich Step Up
> Mayor Bloomberg has vowed
> to take shorter showers. The Koch brothers
> are lowering the thermostat two degrees
> in every one of their mansions. Rupert Murdoch
> has ordered a fleet of Priuses
> for his domestic staff.
>
> When all the billionaires
> of the Walton family changed to compact
> fluorescent light bulbs, they saved enough energy
> to buy Corpus Christi, Texas.
>
> Corporations are doing their part, too:
> Goldman Sachs is making compost
> with five years of shredded account sheets,
> while British Petroleum is recycling
> advertising strategies from the tobacco industry.
> Whole mountains are being removed
> in the effort to bring you clean coal.
>
> Change is in the air. Citizens,
> we invite you to sit back
> and watch it all happen on television.

Goodrich's satirical look at the super-rich reminds us that most of the steps any of us are taking to address climate change are miniscule. The poem not only makes it apparent that for even the largest consumers to make commonly urged reductions in consumption would be of small benefit, but, worse yet, it's unlikely that these individuals and corporations who are removing Kentucky mountaintops and who

are wealthy enough to buy an entire Texas city would ever take any significant action to address environmental problems. The unlikelihood of any of the decisions Goodrich presents makes us laugh—which reminds us that humor is one of the most powerful tools in a poet's toolbox and often a welcome relief. E. B. White seems to read the political situation accurately when he says that "A despot doesn't fear eloquent writers preaching freedom—he fears a drunken poet who may crack a joke that will take hold." Drunken or sober, a poet with a sense of humor can often generate more political response than one writing with earnest sincerity.

In these times of polarized political discourse, we could use good political poetry of place that calls up unconsidered viewpoints and aspects of landscape issues, and asks questions rather than asserting preconceived positions. We are looking for political poetry of place that increases the complexity of issues, to counter the reductionism so increasingly common in our civic discourse, in which only two oversimplified stances oppose one another, devoid of the nuance that poets are so expert at. In an earlier time of political stress, when the "house-painter" Adolf Hitler was gearing up for war, Bertolt Brecht in the following poem challenged poets with a question we might now ask ourselves:

> In Dark Times
>
> They won't say: when the walnut tree shook in the wind
> But: when the house painter crushed the workers.
> They won't say: when the child skimmed a flat stone across the rapids
> But: when the great wars were being prepared for.
> They won't say: when the woman came into the room
> But: when the great powers joined forces against the workers.
> However, they won't say: the times were dark
> Rather: why were their poets silent?

We're calling for your poems that speak out on the politics of place.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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