Afterword

Poetry of Place and the Beginning of Wisdom: On Naming the World

When we started *Windfall* in 2002, we oriented it toward poetry of place out of concern that places in the Northwest were losing the characteristics that Northwesterners have always valued. Rural and urban landscapes were not just becoming developed but were becoming bland, homogenous imitations of other American places, less complex and less wild. Asphalt, strip malls, and common invasive species of flora, fauna, and *Homo sapiens* were spreading throughout the region. We thought that focusing attention on the characteristics of Northwest places would be a first step toward valuing them and then protecting them: We can't value what we don't notice.

As the effects of global climate change become more worrisome—warmer days, more intense storms, fiercer wildfires—we add a new intention: providing witness to the Pacific Northwest that we have known and that in some respects is slipping away. The places will of course remain, the landscapes will endure, but likely in a changed state. We consider it part of our task now to document the landscapes, both built and natural, before they are irrevocably altered. In discussing warming oceans and accelerating extinctions, our children and their friends have told us on several occasions, "You're so lucky to have lived when you did." That's an odd sentiment for young people to express. But they have studied the science of climate change, and they can see the trajectories the natural world is on: Dozens of self-reinforcing feedback loops, such as the current melting of the polar ice caps and release of methane from melting permafrost, are unlikely to be stopped. Writing about our still intact Northwest places and how they are changing might provide comfort in the recollection of how places used to be, a blueprint for restoration, and testimony of the processes underway. Exact naming also improves a poem's concision, imagery, and connotations.

We know that poetry is not the best vehicle for bringing about political action, for "poetry makes nothing happen," as W. H. Auden

tells us. Besides, poetry that calls for specific political action may, after a brief time, be dismissible, since action that is appropriate when a poem is written may quickly become inappropriate as circumstances change. Defining a problem, however, is always a necessary step before attempting any solutions. As they say, a problem well stated is a problem half solved, and poets excel at stating problems. The steps are familiar: close observation, empathy with the subject being observed, precision in describing. The close observation requires patience, practice, and all five senses open to perception. We tend to see what we expect to see, but poets are trained differently, to be open to any possibility, even the most unlikely. Empathy, too, a stock in trade for writers, can be improved with practice, as generations of Japanese ink-painters have demonstrated in contemplating, entering, and becoming one with a blade of grass, a cherry blossom, a heron. The precision in describing requires more than practice and patience, though: It requires not just facility with language, but also knowledge—knowledge of what is being observed and its significance.

The biologist E. O. Wilson is fond of quoting a Chinese saying that "The beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right name." Naming things accurately is often a first step to knowledge, too. In this issue's poem "The Vascular Plant List of Mount Townsend," Eric le Fatte demonstrates to the reader (and to the unnamed compiler or compilers of the list) how "When you named all the plants / my world grew." Poetry has always expanded the breadth and complexity of a reader's world by naming what might otherwise be overlooked.

Naming particular plants, animals, and human activities in a place provides an extended definition of the place, often eliminating the need for a place name within the poem. Mike Langtry's poem "Trees Swaying in an Unknown Gust" carries an epigraph of "Seneca, Oregon," but even most Oregonians likely don't know where that is. Within the first lines, we get a good idea through the naming of foliage:

> Grassland fingers reached in
> between houses and stores.
> Junipers, sagebrush, and pines

rooted up to the highway
that served as the main street.

As Langtry demonstrates, a knowledge of flora works as well in towns as in countryside: "Juniper, sagebrush, and pines" clearly situates the poem on the dry side of the Cascades.

Identifying plants flowering together at a particular time might be shorthand for designating the time of year, obviating the need for a month or season label, and, in addition, providing data to track changes in plants' flowering times. In "What Flowers Are Blooming," Eleanor Berry asserts that "To know a place" is "to know without a thought / what plants bloom / at the same time." That's the approach of a poet of place. Tim McNulty demonstrates this sort of knowledge in identifying a precise point in spring by saying what has bloomed and what hasn't in the opening lines of "Current Blossom Poem":

Because they've just opened their eyes,
I'm careful to step around the small violets.
and because the trillium haven't yet come
to bloom, I look closely—arms
piled up with wood.

In the past hundred or so years, plants have been flowering progressively earlier and earlier, sometimes disrupting the lives of the birds and butterflies, bees, and other insects that depend upon the flowers and who the flowers in turn depend upon for pollination. Poets are often the first to notice such changes in a locale.

The sometimes bizarre connotations of common names for local plants can establish a mood or convey an idea while offering the reader an image. The Pacific Northwest's plants offer many richly connotative names: candy flower, skunk cabbage, thimbleberry, fairybells, bleeding heart, foamflower, windflower, forget-me-not, ocean spray, honeysuckle, selfheal, pearly everlasting, jewelweed, thistle, devil's club. Michael McDowell's "Hiking with Kids" in this issue, for instance, uses common names of plants to convey opposing aspects of the Columbia River

Gorge. The image of children walking past "poison oak and stinging nettle and devil's club" suggests the dangers of hiking in the Gorge, contrasted with the magic of the Gorge for children: flowers that are blue bells, or shooting stars, or inside-out.

Sometimes a lesser-known common name for a plant perfectly fits a poem's mood or bolsters an idea. A welcome addition to a shelfful of field guides has been the free iNaturalist app for smart phones. You take a picture of any plant, tree, insect, or animal, click on "What did you see?" and the app provides a most likely identification complete with image, common name, and scientific name, and a list of ten other possibilities, some with notations of "visually similar" or "seen nearby." The nonprofit iNaturalist network, supported by the California Academy of Sciences and the National Geographic Society as well as other organizations worldwide, has recorded over 13 million observations, which perhaps accounts for its amazing accuracy. Writing in the *New York Times* about iNaturalist, Ferris Jabr addressed the question asked by his father, "Why is it so important to know the names?" His answer:

> Learning the names of wild things changes the way we look at nature and the way we think about it. . . . Learning the names of our many wild neighbors is an exercise in perspective and empathy, transforming the outdoors from a pastoral backdrop into a world of parallel societies.

The exact name of a plant, animal, bird, insect, or other organism often turns an element of nature from local color into an integral component of the poem's meaning.

As Jabr implies, the behavior of particular kinds of trees and plants can offer a parallel to our human behavior, which a poem might exploit. The behavior could be used to explain a less-than-happy state of mind, as in Charles Goodrich's "Aspens and Vandals":

> I. West Side
> First, alders, and maples

grow thick and intermingled
here in the Valley, and the undergrowth
of snowberry and Indian plum gets all snarled up
with Himalayan blackberry. Throw in

the rank entanglements
of e-mail, job obligations, family
snits and it gets a little
claustrophobic.

Here the entanglements of prolifically growing Willamette Valley foliage parallel the "rank entanglements" of his various obligations, as if the foliage and obligations take their cues from one another. In the rest of the poem, the speaker escapes both sets of entanglements (at least temporarily) by fleeing to the east side of the Cascade mountains.

The behavior of particular groups of humans and species of animals in a place also provides a rich source of material for a poem. In "Rings of Sea," Paulann Petersen describes the symbiotic interactions of backpackers and white-tailed deer in the Sky Lakes Wilderness:

They come for salt, for the flavor
we carry with us up to these mountain lakes.
In the freeze-dried entrees, jerky and gorp.
In Betty Crocker's Skillet Meals.
Just add water. Simmer and eat.
With the urine leaving our bodies, golden and warm,
we lay down the wide hoops
of salt lick these white-tails seek.

Sky Lakes Wilderness. Its campsites are ringed
with urine-laden duff.

Petersen describes backpackers "sending a yellow stream splashing onto bark crumble, needles and cones." As the campers sit around a fire, deer approach:

Their ruminant mouths swim
with craving. They brave our nearness
to circle close, to nibble on the ring
made of pine needles and bits of bark,
to swallow whatever holds
the one ocean they'll ever taste.

Petersen's description is based on knowledge of both backpackers and white-tailed deer in the southern Oregon Cascades. In other places, such as the North Cascades and the Olympic Mountains, mountain goats habituated to people dictate that backpackers develop different behaviors. As the ranger in Don Colburn's poem in this issue demonstrates, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife encourages hikers and backpackers to urinate at least fifty yards away from trails because while mountain goats are licking backpackers' urinated salt and other minerals off trail side rocks and vegetation, hikers coming upon them have been threatened, attacked, and in once instance, killed. Different places present mammals with different behaviors ready to be put into poems.

The behavior of particular kinds of plants might offer a model for how to adapt to the life we find ourselves in, as in Ellen Waterston's "Scale House." The speaker tells us that she stopped traveling while still on the east side of the Cascades, that she

settled for somewhere shy of my imagined
Eden. Here, sage leans its small grey
shoulders into the scorch of day. Desert lilies
push through pebbles of pumice. This notion
of blooming in volcanic ash I have come
to understand.

Sage brush and desert lilies demonstrate to the speaker that it's possible to bloom even in the ashes of the past, offering, perhaps, some small peace of mind. Landscapes offer endless lessons in adaptation, a necessary ingredient for resilience in a changing world.

Plants and animals aren't the only aspects of the Northwest landscape whose exact names might benefit a poem; geographical features also provide an opportunity for increasing the richness of a poem and documenting how things are now. Particular landforms often carry names whose sounds are often a delight on the lips. Terms relating to mountains such as *cirque, crevasse, fissure, fumarole, glacier, lava, moraine, scree, talus,* and *tarn* add texture to a poem. Such etymologically rich words create images in readers' minds and suggest that the writer knows the subject well and is writing with an authority that deserves our trust. General terms such as *hillside, valley,* and *plain* pale in comparison.

In this issue, Francis Opila's tour de force of exact naming in "High Tide Line / Resolved" recognizes seascapes as well, telling of the Pacific Ocean's trash coming ashore, "carried on swells, / pushed by waves / pulled by tides, / out onto the sand, / Oregon north coast beach, / high tide line. . . ." The breakers, gales, swells, waves, sand, and high tide line which Opila names are all parts of Northwest beaches. Tristan Gooley's *How to Read Water* offers a poet even more terms for exactly describing that boundary between land and sea in his descriptions and explanations of the *swash* that surges up the beach after a wave has broken, the returning *backwash* that becomes the *undertow*, cross-hatched l*adderback ripples* in sand, *rip currents, pinholes* where air has burst through sand to escape after a wave has withdrawn, the small *domes* where the air hasn't managed to escape, the *rill marks* water creates in the sand as it returns to the ocean in trickles and streams after high tide. Using exact terms such as these brings both writer and reader closer to the physical fact of landscapes.

In *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*, Barry Lopez and Debra Gwartney cite the observation that "we are a people groping for a renewed sense of place and community" who want to be less isolated, and to gain or regain "a sense of allegiance with our chosen places." They explain their intentions and hopes in compiling their collection of place-based landscape terminology:

> We wanted to recall and to explore a language more widespread today than most of us imagine, because we believed an acquaintance with it, using it to say more clearly and precisely what we mean, would bring us a certain kind of relief. It would draw us closer to the landscapes upon which we originally and hopefully founded our democratic arrangement for governing ourselves, our systems of social organization, and our enterprise in economics. If we could speak more accurately, more evocatively, more familiarly about the physical places we occupy, perhaps we could speak more penetratingly, more insightfully, more compassionately about the flaws in these various systems which, we regularly assert, we wish to address and make better.

Their book seems especially suited for poets and novelists who "have recognized that something emotive abides in the land, and that it can be recognized and evoked." They relish the exact words for the features of landscapes, telling us that "One must wait for the moment when the thing—the hill, the tarn, the lunette, the kiss tank, the caliche flat, the bajada—ceases to be a thing and becomes something that knows we are there."

Climate change adds complexity to the task of learning the vocabulary developed over centuries and millennia by those who have lived longest and closest to the land. The landscapes of the world are changing in ways that we have never developed language for. Part of the reason why climate change hasn't shaken the priorities of Americans may lie in the bland language used to describe what's happening. Scientists command the discourse, and the language of science tends to be Latinate, abstract, and emotionally sterile—the opposite of poetry. We need more lively, metaphorical, image-oriented language to talk about the new realities of the physical world. Many of the words we use to describe the elements of our landscapes today are as memorable as they are because centuries of English poets' metaphors and other expressions have been incorporated into everyday language.

Several projects are underway to address the lack of adequate language for describing the rapidly changing natural world. The "Bureau of Linguistical Reality" started by Alicia Escott and Heidi Quante invites contributions of new words to create "a new vocabulary for the Anthropocene." The words generated by contributors so far may not be the most poetic, but they do fulfill the goal of creating neologisms to describe experiences for which no words exist in English. One word featured on Escott and Quante's website is *ennuipocalypse* (and its slang form, *slowpocalypse*), to account for the "painfully boring" and "excruciatingly slow" rate at which the natural world is reported to be unraveling in the daily news. Another word is *soltactiphoria*, naming the euphoria experienced when assessing soil quality tactically with the fingertips and breathing in its aroma, "accentuated by the ancient, learned, earned knowledge that this is indeed a rich, nourishing, life-giving soil."

Other environmentally oriented writers have suggested finding existing English words with more emotional and sensory appeal to replace the purposefully neutral terms of science. They recommend that the term "climate breakdown" replace "climate change," and "ecocide" replace "extinction." The word "breakdown" reminds us of unfortunate experiences with machinery of mental states; words ending in *-cide* conjure unpleasant memories of murders and other deaths. In her book *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore* about rising sea levels, Elizabeth Rush presents the word *rampike,* now used by coastal landscape architects to designate a tree that's died from too much salt water in its root system. The word has been "resurrected from an older and slightly more arcane English," another source for new words in the climate-change era. Considering the book's photos of the stolid trunks of dead hardwood trees thrusting their spiky branches into the sky, the word seems poetically apt. We know that a reader is more likely to agree when a writer combines *logos* and *ethos* with *pathos;* logical and ethical appeals often fail without strong emotional engagement. Poetry, exceling at eliciting strong emotion, is the perfect ground for growing a new language for the natural world.

The more dynamic elements of nature also benefit from exact names. This issue of *Windfall* contains three poems dealing with recent wildfires, whose intensity and increased size have been one of the more devastating natural changes in the Northwest. Emily Antonia Fox García's "Things I Have Not Told My Father about the Archer Mountain Fire" is exact in naming "N95 masks," "dozer lines," and the Eagle Creek and Archer Mountain fires. The onomatopoeia of Penelope Scambly Schott's word choices in "Dance of the Fire Imps" recreates some of the feel of the Long Hollow Fire near Dufur with *spark*, *charred*, and *flared*. We know that the weather in coming years will offer us experiences we're not accustomed to, from superstorms to droughts, summerlike days in February and continuous downpours, yet to be captured in fresh metaphorical language tied to a specific place.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass,* the environmental biologist (and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation) Robin Wall Kimmerer tells a story about knowing botanical names:

> A plant scientist, armed with his notebooks and equipment, is exploring the rainforests for new botanical discoveries, and he has hired an indigenous guide to lead him. Knowing the scientist's interests, the young guide takes care to point out the interesting species. The botanist looks at him appraisingly, surprised by his capacity. "Well, well, young man, you certainly know the names of a lot of these plants." The guide nods and replies with downcast eyes. "Yes, I have learned the names of all the bushes, but I have yet to learn their songs."

Learning and using exact names opens the door to learning those songs, to greater understanding and empathy for the world around us. Kimmerer asserts that "To be native to a place we must learn to speak its language." It's a life-long process that poets can take delight in.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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