Afterword

History and Poetry of Place

History, you say? That moniker for a thousand boring classes in high school and college, that dry regurgitation of the past long dead, that intellectual selection of events mostly violent and mostly manufactured by academic ruling classes? Well, yes, that's history sometimes. And history is boring only if the reader assumes he or she is not part of it, not its heir. As Faulkner famously writes in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Faulkner's fictions and many other works of art clearly depend on a historical context of some kind. All of us assume history in our lives. As psychologist and activist Dorothy Dinnerstein writes, "The human being, so far as we can tell, is the only animal who knows that anything happened before it was born." We cannot pretend otherwise.

To put this issue in perspective, consider the work of Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998), who lived through some of the most horrific events of the twentieth century, including the occupation of Poland by the Nazis in World War II and the rule of Soviet-backed communism from 1945 to 1989. Except for brief sojourns in West Berlin and Paris, Herbert remained in Poland and kept on writing, even when censored. One of his poems, "Why the Classics," published in 1968, implies a rationale for studying history in response to critics who said that Herbert made too much use of classic literature in his work. The poem has three sections, centered on an episode in the life of Thucydides (460-395 BCE), who, along with Herodotus, was the earliest historian of ancient Greece. He wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta (431-404 BCE). However, Thucydides was also a commander in that conflict, that is, a direct participant in the history that he was writing. Herbert begins:

1

In the fourth book of the Peloponnesian War
Thucydides tells among other things
the story of his unsuccessful expedition

among long speeches of chiefs
battles sieges plague
dense net of intrigues of diplomatic endeavors
the episode is like a pin
in a forest

the Greek colony Amphipolis
fell into the hands of Brasidos
because Thucydides was late with relief

for this he paid his native city
with lifelong exile

exiles of all times
know what price that is.

As we learn from reading Thucydides directly, Brasidos was the Spartan commander who in 424 BCE was determined to seize Athenian-controlled Amphipolis, situated as it was at the mouth of the River Strymon, important to Athenian naval traffic. Brasidos was unable to take the fortified city by force of arms, and he was aware that Thucydides was stationed at the island of Thasos, a half-day's sail away. Therefore Brasidos promised the citizenry of Amphipolis leniency and relief if they would surrender; he won them over, and they welcomed him into the city. This happened on the same day that Thucydides arrived, too late, with Athenian reinforcements. "Too late" in the eyes of the Athenians was equivalent to total failure, so they sent Thucydides into exile. Herbert continues:

2

generals of the most recent wars
if a similar affair happens to them
whine on their knees before posterity
praise their heroism and innocence

they accuse their subordinates
envious colleagues

unfavorable winds

Thucydides says only
that he had seven ships
it was winter
and he sailed quickly

Herbert condemns those "generals of the most recent wars" for making excuses and blaming others or blaming bad conditions. We don't know what other generals he may have had in mind, but we can imagine plenty of candidates. As other historical sources show, Thucydides could easily have blamed the citizens of Amphiopolis for being sweet-talked into surrender by Brasidos—indeed, the population of the city was only about half Athenian, unwilling to believe that Athens would come to their rescue, while the other half was likely sympathetic to the Spartan cause. However, Thucydides does not blame anyone or anything. He simply states the facts: seven ships, winter, and sailing quickly. That is, he did what he could under the circumstances. Herbert obviously applauds the integrity of Thucydides for taking responsibility for his failure. Ironically, Thucydides benefited from his exile, because it permitted him to circulate freely, even among the Spartans, in order to gather material for his history. He died in 395 BCE, after the Peloponnesian War had ended, but his history breaks off mid-sentence while covering the events of 411 BCE, before the end of the war in 404 BCE. However, Herbert has one further point:

3
if art for its subject
will have a broken jar
a small broken soul
with a great self-pity

what will remain after us
will be like lovers' weeping
in a small dirty hotel
when wall-paper dawns

Herbert goes beyond the question of the integrity of Thucydides or the lack thereof in our own time. He turns his attention to contemporary art, which to him resembles a broken jar, a broken soul spilling self-pity. This means that we bequeath to those who come after us only diminished, personal occasions, like lovers in a cheap hotel where weeping is as pathetic and artificial as wallpaper. Indeed, if we consider much of the poetry written today, we find mostly a personal focus, avoiding events outside of the self. Without a sense of what we owe the world, we bequeath to posterity nothing but gravestones.

The key about history that Herbert give us is this*: History allows us to understand who we are, and who we are is also where we are in time and place.* For Thucydides on this occasion, the time was the winter of the eighth year of the war, and the place was Amphipolis. Today Amphipolis is no longer a living city, only a bare ruin, a tourist attraction. But in 424 BCE, this place was where Thucydides met his fate as an exile and as a historian, and as an exemplar of integrity and humility. How does our own history in 2019 give us the means of transcending the failure of our aspirations? As poet Robert Bly said at a reading, "By middle-age, poets I know have swum away from many overturned boats—and lived." Metaphorically speaking, we all have made that swim, and we need the poetry that tells about it.

Another, more recent example of time and place where history unfolds is W. H. Auden's well-known poem, "September 1, 1939." Auden titles the poem by the date, because on that specific day World War II began with Hitler's invasion of Poland. The poet's place appears in the first stanza of the poem:

> I sit in one of the dives
> On Fifty-Second Street
> Uncertain and afraid
> As the clever hopes expire
> Of a low dishonest decade:
> Waves of anger and fear
> Circulate over the bright

> And darkened lands of the earth,
> Obsessing our private lives;
> The unmentionable odor of death
> Offends the September night.

Auden begins the stanza with his personal condition as an expatriate Englishman sitting in one of the bars in New York City, but by the end of the stanza, his perspective has widened to “the bright and darkened lands of the earth”—that is, *all* of the lands of the earth. Auden returns to the dive in stanza five:

> Faces along the bar
> Cling to their average day:
> The lights must never go out,
> The music must always play,
> All the conventions conspire
> To make this fort assume
> The furniture of home;
> Lest we should see where we are,
> Lost in a haunted wood,
> Children afraid of the night
> Who have never been happy or good.

Here the poem goes beyond the “faces along the bar” to develop a psychological dimension. People are deluded about their true natures, which are childlike, clinging to home, seeking safety from their unconscious selves. Auden regards such children as manipulated into war by their masters. In the third stanza of the poem, like Zbigniew Herbert, he draws on Thucydides:

> Exiled Thucydides knew
> All that a speech can say
> About Democracy,
> And what dictators do,
> The elderly rubbish they talk

To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

Auden is likely referring to a funeral oration for the Athenian fallen given by Pericles in 431 BCE, the first year of the Peloponnesian War, as recorded by Thucydides. Pericles was the Athenian leader until his death from the plague in 429. In his oration he gave a ringing defense and rationale for Athenian democracy. Thucydides, as a member of the nobility, regarded rule by the people with grave suspicion, and he reckoned that democracy worked best when a great man like Pericles was its leader. Otherwise, the people get, as Auden says, "mismanagement and grief" that must be suffered all over again. As Auden notes, Thucydides himself is writing from exile (perhaps like the self-exiled Auden), underlining the limits he found in democracy.

Auden concludes the poem with an affirmation of the individual voice:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

"Them" in the first line refers to "the Just," rhyming with "dust," who in Auden's view (in this poem at least) constitute the hope for a human future. Common in modernity, the personal becomes universal.

By now, we know enough about Thucydides to follow the references to him in the first and last stanzas of this poem by Clemens Starck:

Thucydides, Bill O'Reilly and I Discuss Foreign Affairs

O'Reilly is bad-mouthing the French
while Thucydides

recites in Greek key passages
from his monumental *History of the Peloponnesian War.*

I myself, given the bellicose nature
of certain local "patriots"
and the woeful politics of the country at large,
am simply
trying to be reasonable.

"I've been to France," O'Reilly says, "it's beautiful, very
historical."

Struck by this dim-witted observation,
I reply: "O'Reilly, I wish I could say this in Greek,
but in plain English,
you have your head up your ass."

Meanwhile, Thucydides is busy explaining
how after arriving too late to relieve the garrison
at Amphipolis,
he was relieved of his command, and so
took up writing instead.

Starck is performing a task similar to that of Zbigniew Herbert: By comparing the high purpose and accomplishment of Thucydides to present actors, the latter are found diminished and wanting. However, Starck's approach takes a more comic turn in the way he skewers Bill O'Reilly's "dim-witted"rhetoric by comparing it to the scale of Thucydides's "monumental" history. Here's a technique that poets can use.

Rarely are poets presented such a rich place and time for a poem as Auden or Thucydides. However, all of us emerge from some kind of historical context, even in our Pacific Northwest. Kathleen Flenniken, the poet laureate emerita of Washington state, grew up in Richland, downstream on the Columbia River from the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. Her 2012 book *Plume* consists of poems about

her childhood, family, and neighbors in the 1950s and 1960s, when the dangers of radioactive pollution of air, water, and soil were less understood or generally discounted. Nuclear energy was considered a national achievement, which obscured the reality. Here President Kennedy, seen through Flenniken's eyes as a child and her adult awareness, helps to promote the pride in nuclear power:

My Earliest Memory Preserved on Film

—John Kennedy at Hanford Nuclear Reservation, September 26, 1963

Somewhere in that sea of crisp white shirts
  I'm sitting on my father's shoulders
as you dedicate our new reactor and praise us

for shaping history. The helicopter that set you down
  in our proudest moment
waits camera right, ready to whisk you away.

A half century later, I click play and play again
  for proof you approve—
but the nuclear age is complicated.

Are you amazed that eight reactors
  mark the bend in our river?
Are you troubled we need a ninth? I can't forget

we'll lose you in a few weeks, that sometime
  between then and now
our presidents will forget us.

But today the wind is at your back, like a blessing.
  Our long-dead senators applaud
as you touch a uranium-tipped baton to a circuit

and activate a shovel atomically.
  This is the future.
Dad holds me up to see it coming.

When Flenniken says, "we'll lose you in a few weeks," she is referring to the assassination of Kennedy two months later on November 22, 1963. The "long-dead senators," Henry Jackson and Warren Magnuson, both strong supporters of Hanford and the US military, could be counted on to applaud. The principle figures in this scene, along with most if not all of those in "crisp white shirts," including Flenniken's father, are all dead—leaving us with a nuclear cleanup problem that our presidents since then have failed to address. Indeed, the book *Plume* begins with President Obama in 2008 unable to field a question about the lack of funding for Hanford cleanup because he knows nothing about it. The power of this poem consists in Flenniken's precise adult awareness of the situation, and at the same time, her placement of herself in the poem as a child whose future is coming. Poems based on history work best when told from the personal presence of the poet before, during, or after the event—some reason to take on this particular piece of history, some stake in the story. What places have you been part of in childhood or youth that later turned out to be part of a larger historical moment? Great possibilities for poems wait there.

Flenniken's inclusion of her father in her poem (sitting on his shoulders, being held up by him) reminds us that history is as close as the older members of our families. Many parents and grandparents are reluctant to share their past, or their past gets lost in the busy lives of offspring, who are more concerned with their own issues and experiences. But when we do extend the effort to learn how our elders' lives went, we find plenty of rich material for poems. Harold Johnson, who was born and raised in Yakima, Washington, speaks of history in this excerpt from his poem "My Father's Life":

> Thirty years after the Proclamation, black men
> and boys still got snatched, bought and sold for labor
> where he was born, but understanding he wasn't the kind
> to survive that unkindness, he fled at age fourteen.
> Lean and light on his feet, I imagine. I have seen his
> physique in a fleet brother, a son and a nephew,

six feet tall when major leaguers were five-eight,
and I know he could run. And he run from King Cotton
and turpentine and railroad ties, from knee-deep slime
in coal mines, from beatings, from leg chains,
from sweat and puke in creaking prison wagons.
Don't know exactly where but he did go a-roving,
two stints in the army, a cavalry soldier at Fort Huachuca
in Arizona. The black discharge paper with the white
writing says he left service at Fort Leonard Wood
in Missouri after The Great War. Character: Good.
Hoboing during the time of *The Birth of a Nation*,
knew of lynching, knew of riots, running for his life.

In a state named for a Founder who held slaves,
settled on the freedom of pick and shovel on a highway
and a woman of infirm health but compatible soul,
got a job hauling garbage for the town.
Got four children during The Great Depression,
and in a cramped house with no plumbing
and little coin, got to trusting in Jesus. Pentecostal
fire filling house and yard to the curb, Daddy.

Johnson shows us that a recitation of specific dates is not necessary, if we are careful about how we connect a person's life to historical times and places. Johnson does this from the first line, "Thirty years after the Proclamation." The Proclamation he refers to could only be the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln in 1863. According to Johnson, as late as 1893, black men and boys were abducted for forced labor, slavery by another name. About that time, his father turned fourteen and fled his origins in the American South. In that land of King Cotton, life's options for black men were awful and few, leading to stints in the US Army at two bases and the hobo life during the Jim Crow era (1870s–1960s) of lynching and riots. In the second section of the poem, Johnson's father winds up in the state of Washington, named after the first president, who owned slaves. In

Yakima he worked in manual labor, married, and fathered four children during the Great Depression (1929-1939). Notice Johnson's parallelism in the use of "got": *got* a job, *got* four children, *got* to trusting in Jesus—as if all of these were the same kind of acquisition, reflecting his father's stoicism in the face of hard conditions. We don't need to look up the dates (as we have here) to realize that Johnson's father lived through the most difficult years for black people after the Civil War. Clearly, his father's story in this poem shows who he is. The questions before us: What were our parents or grandparents doing during those same years? How did history dictate their lives?

History in poems of place can take many more forms than a *Windfall* afterword can cover. But sometimes, a simple experience of seeing a memorial or monument to some event in the past can trigger a poem, as in this short piece by Verlena Orr:

> ARMISTICE DAY
> at the Newport Vietnam Memorial,
> I limp through drizzle of heart and weather
> down the paved path to the Pacific
> designed with alcoves and benches
> to pause, rest, read the chiseled
> names of local soldiers fallen,
> remember those who survive with anguish
> relentless as the ocean, knotting and unknotting.
> A bit of sun unravels a frayed thread.
> We are now in two ongoing wars.
> Are their memorials being sketched?
> I stumble my way back up, summit the edge
> to then drive off to the anesthesia, patriotic
> balm, and capitalistic morphine of shopping.

In this nonce sonnet, Orr manages to capture the drizzly ambience of the location that reflects a somber mood, the fallen soldiers and survivors suffering post-traumatic stress disorder from the Vietnam War, the two current wars (most likely in Iraq and Afghanistan, both

still ongoing as we write), and the "patriotic balm" of shopping. Orr takes a stringent view of the ongoing wars: "Are their memorials being sketched?" Of memorials in general, German writer Kurt Tucholsky (1890-1935) voiced a similar attitude: "Every glorification of someone killed in war means that three more will be killed in the next war." War memorials enable us to remember the fallen, but they also justify war for coming generations. Orr implies that we compulsively turn away from this cycle with the drug of shopping, among other drugs. History, Orr is saying, has inflicted this condition upon us: Under late capitalism, war and shopping are contingent upon each other. What public monuments have you encountered that elicited a strong feeling, one that could drive a poem?

Though all poems of history must be necessarily situated in the present, the history in question may be as antique as Greece in 424 BCE, or as recent as last year, essentially yesterday. On September 2, 2017, a fifteen-year-old boy threw a firecracker and started the Eagle Creek Fire on the Oregon side of the Columbia Gorge. The fire was not fully contained until November 30, after burning some 50,000 acres. On September 5, an ember from that fire flew across the Columbia River to the Washington side and ignited the Archer Mountain Fire, which was contained by September 13, after burning 260 acres. Emily Antonia Fox García engages this history directly in this excerpt from her poem, "Things I Have Not Told My Father about the Archer Mountain Fire":

> ***II.***
> There lingers a stale campfire smell
> on the trail climbing up the mountain from Archer Creek.
> Where there aren't switchbacks,
> I wish there were.
>
> And so I breathe deeply, remembering the day last September
> when we turned off the smoke detectors.
> First one and then the other started screeching
> and wouldn't stop, though we had closed the windows
> two days earlier.

How bad was it?
We’d mostly stopped going outside. We wore N95 masks
while we watered ash-coated vegetables.
We couldn’t sleep, couldn’t switch off
the most ancient part of our brains—it still knows
what that much smoke means.

The closest evacuations were eight miles east
on Smith-Cripe Road,
where the hike begins.

. . . .

On my map the dozer lines are depicted by strings of stout Xs
many times thicker
than the pipeline and trails and roads they follow.
So it is with some surprise
that I kneel in a space perhaps fifteen feet across
and give thanks to men and women who stood here
between us

and a fire started by an ember
that crossed a river
a mile wide.

At *Windfall* we are receiving more poems like García’s about wildfires in the West. They are becoming our yearly reality in the summer as global warming dries the forests and accelerates the winds. García’s poem shows us recent history that will also be our future. As the poem says, our ancient brains know when fire is out of control and bearing down upon us. The smoke detectors go off, we have difficulty breathing, and ash is everywhere. The poem ends in gratitude to the firefighters struggling to contain a blaze that can hardly be contained. In the California fires of 2018, we saw the town of Paradise destroyed. So far we in the Pacific Northwest have been lucky that no fires have consumed towns as large as Paradise—is it only a matter of time? In July 2018 towns near Dufur, Oregon, were threatened by the Substation

Fire, which burned more than 78,000 acres. In our climate-change reality, poetry of place can show how we feel about the loss of one world and the arrival of another. Send us your poems of the history you carry with you!

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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