Afterword

Weather and Poetry of Place

One inescapable aspect of place is weather. Once we walk out the door, we're in it. It influences our moods, our activities, our safety on sidewalks and mountain trails. It influences our choice of clothes. It's what people talk about to ease into a conversation. Weather is also one of the most fundamental ways that we regularly interact with the landscape. We can't help but feel the sun or rain upon our face, or the wind running its fingers through our hair. In *Poetry in the Making*, British poet laureate Ted Hughes writes, "One poetic experience which all of us go through, whether we like it or not, is the hour by hour effect on us of the weather. Out of this almost everybody, at some time in their lives, can produce pieces of poetry. . . . poetry they are glad to have written."

Incorporating weather in a poem enables the writer to bring in all the senses—sounds of rain and wind and thunder, the petrichor smell of fresh rain after a dry spell, the taste of blown dust or sand or snowflakes on the tongue, the feel of an intense August sun on our bodies, the sight of branches blowing in a storm or a rainbow across a river. Even a small mention of weather in a Northwest poem of place is a good idea. For most American poetry, the default settings for a poem's weather are generally blue sky, mid-day sunshine with perhaps a cloud here or there, little wind, and pleasant temperatures. For places in the Pacific Northwest, it's usually necessary to manually adjust those weather settings to give the reader an accurate feel of the place and situation.

From its beginning, weather has been a feature of English poetry. The anonymous "Western Wind" of the fifteenth century expresses a longing for the weather that signifies the beginning of spring:

> Westron wynde, when wylle thow blow,
> The smalle rayne down can rayne?
> Cryst, yf my love were in my Armys
> And I yn my bed a gayne!

The speaker's longing for spring's "small rayne" to replace the heavier weather of winter naturally segues into thoughts of springtime love, so the poem becomes a nesting sequence of wishes, beginning with the wind bringing lighter rain, then with "my love in my arms," and finally the two of them in each other's arms in bed. The longing for specific weather prompts thoughts of longing for a specific person, a love poem beginning with weather.

The Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* similarly incorporates weather, describing it so thoroughly that the reader can vicariously experience it:

> WHAN that Aprill with his shoures soote
> The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
> Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
> Inspired hath in every holt and heeth . . .
> Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages. . . .

The sweet-smelling showers of April have bathed the veins of plants with a moisture which is engendering flowers, the west wind is breathing life into tender young sprouts, and we understand that everything about the weather is making people want to get up and move. The weather motivates people to action.

An attentive poetry of place is attuned to microclimates and to the nuances of the weather they produce. When the weather is mild, we rarely think to mention it at all, because it seems so obvious. But poetry often takes the ordinary and finds the extraordinary in it, what Susan Orlean calls the "hiding in plain sight" kind of story. Robert Sund, a native of Olympia, Washington, writes of sunny hot weather during a summer working on a grain elevator in eastern Washington:

> I sit on a rickety bench just outside
> the elevator door,

hoping to see things clearly.
Already the sun is up far enough to be hot,
and shadows
slower than the eye has patience for
begin to leave the hilly fields.
In the air
only a little of the morning remains.
At the base of the elevator,
in one corner,
a piece of chaff twirls around in the wind;
tumbles, pulls, and twirls,
in a spider's
abandoned
web.

Sund looks closely around him for details large (the morning advancing overall, the hilly fields, the elevator) and small (piece of chaff in motion, spider's web). While the eye fails to keep pace with the shadows slowly leaving the hills, he sees a piece of chaff in the spider's web clearly because of its movement. Sund shares with us what he is physically able to see. He may well have identified with that piece of chaff, caught and yet swinging in the wind. In another poem Sund goes a step further and puts into practice what may be the most common response of poets to weather: treating particular weather conditions as analogous to human feelings or states of mind, a form of projection:

Beneath the intensely hot sun
new
landscapes hover and shimmer in the air.
And so,
all the flowers
(pink, dusty blue, yellow, nameless colors)
run back and forth
in and out the fenceposts skirting a field,

rioting with
laughter among themselves because
a wandering, stone-deaf butterfly
dropped in mid-flight
to rest between two rows of stubble,
choosing
a clod of dirt.

Flowers, butterflies, and clods have their own reality, independent of human significance. Are the flowers "rioting with laughter," or is the speaker seeing himself in their nodding colors? He imagines they are laughing at the butterfly's choice of landing on a common clod instead of their colorfulness. But whose laughter is it really, and who "chooses" the clod? Certainly the source is the poet's good humor, which he is projecting onto this scene of "new / landscapes" that "hover and shimmer" in the intently hot air.

In "The Hot Walk," a hot-weather poem set in the hilly countryside around her farm near Yamhill, Oregon, Barbara Drake explores effects of weather:

On one side the wheat is golden and ripe.
On the other, a vineyard
sprawls across the hillside
like a corpse in a Jacobean play.
The Queen Anne's lace
spreads its carroty smell
on the landscape,
and everywhere grass
is dry as needles.

At the corner
where the dusty road turns right,
bees aimlessly circle their white hives
as if wondering what happened

to dewy mornings,
the honey of spring clover.
We meant to take this walk for pleasure
and for betterment,
but the heat has turned it into
a kind of suffering,
a medieval exercise
in purification.

Even the dogs meander along
in a desultory manner.
They keep throwing themselves
into the shade of ditches.
I hope we can make it back.
I hope we have not come too far.

Drake brings us the landscape of heat directly. She deploys comparisons ("like a corpse in a Jacobean play," "dry as needles," "as if wondering what happened / to dewy mornings," "a medieval exercise / in purification"), to reinforce the sense of deprivation under intense heat. But the strongest impression of heat consists in the sense of danger at the end of the poem, that the speaker and companions (two or more people and dogs) may have "come too far." Why too far? Perhaps risking heat stroke or heat exhaustion, an extension of the medieval suffering for purification referred to at the end of the second section.

Sometimes a poem of place requires the long view of weather that a description of climate provides, the way weather always seems to be. One such poem is Petrus Augustus de Génestet's "Boutade," translated by Adriaan Barnouw as "Such Is Holland!" The original title, meaning "a sudden outburst of temper," aptly describes the speaker's attitude. The poem is an onomatopoeic joyride through the various kinds of unpleasantness that residents—human, animal, and vegetable—experience in the weather of the Netherlands:

O land of mud and mist, where man is wet and shivers
Soaked with humidity, with damp and chilly dew,
O, land of unplumbed bogs, of roads resembling rivers,
Land of umbrellas, gout, cold, agues, toothache, flu,

O, spongy porridge-swamp, O homeland of galoshes,
Of cobblers, toads, and frogs, peat diggers, mildew, mold,
Of ducks and every bird that slobbers, splutters, splashes,
Hear the autumnal plaint of a poet with a cold.

Thanks to your clammy clime my arteries are clotted
With blood turned mud. No song, no joy, no peace for me.
You're fit for clogs alone, O land our forebears plotted
And, not at my request, extorted from the sea.

Framed as a complaint, the poem presents weather, climate, and landscape in lovingly evocative images. Almost every element of landscape—mud, mist, humidity, bogs, rivers, "spongy porridge-swamp"—presents the idea of "wetness" in a different form. The frequent alliteration and assonance undercut the seriousness of the speaker's complaint, as in the last stanza's lines "Thanks to your *clammy clime* my arteries are *clotted*" immediately followed by "*blood* turned *mud*." Every place deserves such a well crafted, copious, and intense poetic realization of the effects of weather.

Perhaps the most engaging way to present weather in a poem is to connect it to the activities of people in the locale. In Shakespeare's "Winter" song at the end of *Love's Labor's Lost,* almost every line implies or describes a human activity which the weather has influenced:

When icicles hang by the wall,
    And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
    And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipped, and ways be foul,

Then nightly sings the staring owl,
Tu-who;
Tu-whit, tu-who: a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
Tu-who;
Tu-whit, tu-who: a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

The poem presents the behavior of generic English people—Tom, Dick, and Joan—in response to ordinary cold weather: The shepherd blows warm breath on his fingernails, Tom brings logs in for the fire, the congregation coughs during the parson's sermon. And we see the effects of the weather: The milk is frozen in the pail, blood nipped, birds sit brooding, and Marian's nose is red and raw. Interwoven with the lines of human activities are images of nature's activities: Icicles hang and the wind blows. Yet for all the suffering that the scenes of cold might imply, the poem is joyous: The owl's "Tu-who; Tu-whit, tu-who" is not lonely or chilling, but rather "a merry note." There's hot food on the way, too: Joan is stirring a boiling pot of something, and crabapples have apparently just been roasted and are still hissing in the serving bowl. The many active verbs in the poem suggest that this English winter is nothing like a dead, inactive time.

The Great Plains poet Timothy Murphy demonstrates a way to connect contemporary weather with human activities drawn from history in his clever Shakespearean sonnet about the aftermath of a summer windstorm:

THE TRACK OF A STORM
Bastille Day, 1995

We grieve for the twelve trees we lost last night,
pillars of our community, old friends
and confidants dismembered in our sight,
stripped of their crowns by the unruly winds.
There were no baskets to receive their heads,
no women knitting by the guillotines,
only two sleepers rousted from their beds
by fusillades of hailstones on the screens.
Her nest shattered, her battered hatchlings drowned,
a stunned and silent junko watches me
chainsawing limbs from corpses of the downed,
clearing the understory of debris
while supple saplings which survived the blast
lay claim to light and liberty at last.

Murphy employs a controlling metaphor drawn from the coincidence that the storm occurred on Bastille Day, July 14. The whole Reign of Terror of the French Revolution then provides his metaphors for the storm's destruction of trees: "old friends / and confidants dismembered in our sight," "stripped of their crowns," "unruly," "rousted from their beds," "fusillades," "corpses," "lay claim . . . to liberty at last." The overnight storm and next-day aftermath are a French Revolution in microcosm. Murphy uses alliteration to tie the words of the poem together like lashings tie together the logs of a raft: twelve / trees; lost / last; friends / confidants; stunned / silent; supple / saplings / survived; light / liberty / last. The entire poem is a parade of concrete images of the weather's effects on the natural world, of residents' responses, and of the French Reign of Terror: twelve trees, baskets, heads, women knitting, guillotines, sleepers, beds, hailstones on screens, nest, hatchlings, junko, chainsawing limbs, saplings. A historic era in another country enables a memorable account of a community's contemporary weather.

Weather poems of place can be even more interesting when the human activity is occupational work, especially work done in difficult weather (there is no "good" or "bad" weather, which are only projections of human desire). Clemens Starck provides a stellar example:

It Could Be Worse

Call it *sleet* or call it *snow,*
it's coming down so hard it's hard to see
the two linemen
up there at the crossarm of the pole.
They're working from the bucket of their boom truck
with come-alongs and tackle,
to retrieve our downed power lines
and re-attach us to the grid.

Four days without power
after an early winter storm savaged the countryside . . .
Out all day with a chainsaw
clearing limbs and broken trees from the right-of-way,
I'm standing in the snow now with the line crew foreman,
peering up,
remembering days like this on a construction site
when I wished I'd become a librarian.

It's cold. It's getting dark. I'm soaking wet. The sleet
has turned to freezing rain.
"Some fucking weather!" I say to the guy
over the roar of the truck's diesel,
and he replies: "It could be worse. You could be
sitting at a fucking desk
eight hours a day, five days a week."

Starck reminds us that someone actually has to work in such weather. In the last section of the poem, he shows us how it feels: The weather is cold, dark, turning to freezing rain, and the speaker is soaking wet.

But the last three lines show us that people who work in such weather would rather do this kind of work than spend their days inside. Starck conveys authenticity by his careful word choice in the first section: specific terms like "crossarm," "bucket of their boom truck," "come-alongs and tackle." And then in the second section he places himself in the poem with his chainsaw work and comparing the linemen's work to his own experience in construction. He identifies with the work and the men doing it and cursing it, and he thereby enables us to feel it as well. No projection here. Just straight talk about snowy, sleety weather.

Weather offers many phenomena to incorporate into poetry. There are the wind, rain, heat, mist, clouds, icicles, hail, snow, sleet, and freezing rain of the poems we've considered so far, as well as many other regularly occurring phenomena: tornadoes, hurricanes, ice storms, floods, and drought, to name a few. Within each type of weather, there are many particulars. In the Northwest, we might pay particular attention to the kinds of rain—such as showers, sprinkles, drizzle, mist, mizzle, squall, and downpour. Maxine Kumin plays with the effects of another common kind of Northwest weather, fog, in the first half of her "Morning Swim," set on her "Pobiz Farm" in New Hampshire where she and her husband built a pond for swimming:

> Into my empty head there come
> a cotton beach, a dock wherefrom
>
> I set out, oily and nude
> through mist, in chilly solitude.
>
> There was no line, no roof or floor
> to tell the water from the air.
>
> Night fog thick as terry cloth
> closed me in its fuzzy growth.
>
> I hung my bathrobe on two pegs.
> I took the lake between my legs.

Invaded and invader, I
went overhand on that flat sky.

The "night fog thick as terry cloth" erases boundaries so that "There was no line, no roof or floor / to tell the water from the air." That fog-induced removal of demarcations lets the landscape prefigure the speaker's main experience of merging with the water in the poem's conclusion:

My bones drank water; water fell
through all my doors. I was the well

that fed the lake that met my sea
in which I sang "Abide With Me."

Kumin uses the interaction of landscape and weather to create and reinforce meaning in her poem.

Sometimes weather might be the predominant feature of a particular place, and a description of the place is incomplete unless the weather is front and center. That may be the case in Tim McNulty's "The Wind in Lost Basin," set in the Olympic Mountains of Washington:

All night long
the wind honed the slate
and sandstone boulders—a late
September wind,
just beginning to cut its teeth.

It whittled at the talused ridge,
moaned softly in the spindled trees,
rattled the slender seed stalks
to their knees.

All the flapping tentfly night—
like the wind in the sails of a small lost boat,
a ruffle

in the marmot's thickening coat,
sheen of ice in the shallows
that one day soon won't melt away,
the balance tipped to dark
from day.

No moon.
Arcturus low,
and the Hunter slowly picking his way
up the glacier.

McNulty identifies a particular kind of wind which blows in September, heralding the coming of winter in the Olympics. Such a wind can be intense, as suggested in the first stanza, sharp enough to hone rocks, though destined to become sharper as the season advances ("just beginning to cut its teeth"). It is said to "whittle" the ridge, and to be heard in "spindled" trees and seed stalks. The wind flapping the tent fly, the marmot's thickening coat, and the sheen of ice that won't melt—all signify the time of year, just after equinox (around September 22), "the balance tipped to dark / from day." With no moon, Arcturus appears on the horizon (the high point of Arcturus is in April, so it is associated with spring, but here it is seen in fall, so it's "low on the horizon"). In the last two lines, the constellation Orion ("the Hunter") begins to rise toward its high point in November-December; "slowly picking his way" above the glacier further signifies this time of year, late September. The key element of the poem is wind, and McNulty mixes precise observation with irregular rhymes to deliver a casual-seeming but precise homage to this wild place, the remote Lost Basin.

Winds are often of interest because they affect people's behavior, driving people crazy sometimes. The Santa Ana winds of Southern California are infamous for increasing tensions, blowing down trees, and spreading wildfires. All the named winds, such as Chinook, Mistral, and Sirocco, have their own personalities and histories deserving of poems.

Millennia of poems about weather create rich possibilities for intertextuality, especially for bringing in writings of other cultures. Joseph Stroud's poem "Whiteout" draws on the Tang poet Tu Fu (or Du Fu, 712-770 CE) to add layers of meaning to his concluding images:

> First big storm of the year. Snow level
> dropping to two thousand feet. Blizzards
> on the passes. Icy roads. Whiteouts.
> This morning I can hear the distant *frump*
> of dynamite tearing avalanches from cliffs
> above the Spur. No one's going anywhere
> in the Sierra today. Nothing to do but shove
> a chunk of wood into the stove, put on
> some Brahms, and watch snow sift down
> in a silence of white ash. Nothing to do
> but take a book from the shelf, open to Tu Fu,
> and trace his words like animal tracks scrawling
> across the white page where a white crane rises
> out of the snow's white pavilion.

Stroud starts the poem with three lines of six phrases that present the whiteout conditions in direct terms. With the avalanche danger and "no one's going anywhere," there is nothing to do but stay indoors, stay warm, listen to music, and read. Stroud chooses to read Tu Fu, a poet who, often homeless, wandered all over China during the war-torn An Lu-Shan rebellion. Stroud compares the printed letters of a poem to animal tracks across a white page, which is like snow. Stroud then goes on to make an adroit literary extension: "a white crane rises out of the snow's white pavilion," that is, white on white, essentially invisible, a true whiteout. The poem leaves us lost inside a snowstorm. At the same time, to put Tu Fu in context, images of whiteness, such as snowfall, clouds, and cranes, resonate in Chinese poetry as images of the *Tao*, the indefinite Way.

Climate change has introduced new kinds of weather to write about. Smoke from wildfires has filled cities in Australia during their recent "black summer" and has caused respiratory problems in cities throughout the American West in recent years. Wildfire smoke hovering like fog is a new kind of summer weather, similar to the volcanic smoke "vog" that periodically vexes Hawaii's Kona Coast. Ashland resident Vincent Wixon describes living with wildfire smoke in his poem "Air Conditioning":

> I've opened the house, smoke still in my nostrils.
> For the first time in days I can see the foothills
> across the valley. The fire seventy miles away
> grows, and a small army grapples to contain it.
>
> A scrub jay in the bird bath seems to beseech
> something when it stretches its neck to the sky
> so water can run down its throat. How are its lungs,
> I wonder, as it flies to the cedar tree.
>
> I fall into a pattern of opening the windows
> for a few hours early in the day, then closing them
> when the air smells like a bonfire. We depend
> on systems to get through.
>
> Air recirculates through filters, down ducts,
> across the condenser, then flows again into our rooms
> where we sit in our chairs, blankets covering our legs.
> It's artificial I know, but it's how we live now.

Wixon's poem explores how people are experimenting in ways to cope with the new weather. He considers how the rest of creation is coping when he describes a scrub jay outside "who seems to beseech / something when it stretches its neck to the sky." Of course, much of the natural world isn't able to survive the new weather, as we've learned from the estimated one billion animals that died in Australia's

2019-2020 fire season. In the Northwest, poets have had ample material to witness and document the new weather.

These examples have hardly touched upon the many kinds of Pacific Northwest weather available to write about: the "green flash" when the air is perfectly clear at sunset, "sun dogs" on either side of the sun, Wordsworthian rainbows, our increasingly severe and persistent droughts and unexpected floods, dust devils, silver thaws, rain bombs, firenadoes, and atmospheric rivers like our Pineapple Express. Consider your experiences, and consider what meaning they may hold. In his 1950 poem "An Address to Vacationers at Cape Lookout," William Stafford concludes in the last line, "What disregards people does people good." Weather disregards us, but depending on our place in the world, it shows us where and who we are. We are entering an age in which the weather can only intensify under global warming and climate change. We are the witnesses for our time and bellwethers for our future. Send those poems to *Windfall,* and we will read them!

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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