Afterword

Roads and Trails and Poetry of Place

Many of us travel the same routes daily, weekly, monthly, or annually, and in the process acquire experiences and get to know who and what reside along the way. The most fruitful routes for poetry of place are typically trails and small streets and short stretches of roads—what John Brinckerhoff Jackson calls the vernacular landscape —rather than long sweeps of interstates and highways. The street we live on, a back route to the grocery store, a favorite hiking trail in the Cascades, a stretch of stream regularly kayaked, or a frequently traveled bicycle path may generate a variety of kinds of poetry of place.

Describing a familiar street or forest path accurately and exactly in a poem recognizes its particularity, gives it distinguishing characteristics, and publicizes its personality. It might even partake of what landscape activist Finlay MacLeod calls "counter-desecration": In a public appeal to save a moor on the Isle of Lewis in the Scottish Hebrides, he calls for "a new nomenclature of landscape and how we relate to it, so that the conversation becomes a natural form of human awareness, and so that it ceases to be under-written and under-appreciated and thus readily vulnerable to desecration." What "under-written" and "under-appreciated" roads and trails do you frequent? Every poem of a beloved landscape brings a slight bit more attention to it and counters the blind economic forces that destroy much of what we would all be better off preserving.

Poems of streets close to home may capture the feel of an entire neighborhood. The route described in Charles Goodrich's "Walking to the 7/Eleven for Beer," for instance, humorously gives us a portrait of his neighborhood:

> Odds are good
> that none of us will get dragged out
> by camouflaged men

with machine guns or machetes
and be executed on these lawns tonight.

On the other hand, it looks like Henry's
septic tank is plugged again,
the honey wagon is back, engine roaring,
suction hose writhing in his driveway
like a huge snake.

Two doors down a pudgy woman I don't know
chews her split ends in a half-draped window,
waiting for some prince to flick off the TV
and kiss her out of her blue split-level.

It's my neighborhood, one of the blandest
triumphs of history. A possum
skitters from the ditch on the left
to the ditch on the right. A pimple-faced
moon peers through a hole in the high overcast. . . .

The details we're given—a blue split-level house, a possum, ditches on both sides of the road, a driveway, a septic tank—let us understand that he's walking down a street without a sewage system under it, or storm drains, and with enough green space around for a possum. The speaker says it's one of the "triumphs of history"—perhaps because of its very blandness, it's an eminently safe place to walk at night. He knows some neighbors ("Henry") and not others ("a pudgy woman"). And with the "high overcast," it's typically Northwest.

The safety of Goodrich's neighborhood contrasts sharply with Osip Mandelstam's "barking alleys" and "twisted streets" of the Soviet city of Voronezh in his poem "360." Goodrich comments, "Odds are good / that none of us will be dragged out. . . ." Mandelstam wrote his poem in January-February 1937 as Stalin carried out extensive purges of "enemies of the people," leading to hundreds of thousands being

dragged out of their homes and executed. Mandelstam himself was indeed arrested—not in Voronezh, but in Moscow. In "360," people don't talk to one another because everyone is suspicious of everyone else:

> . . . And the stockings of barking alleys,
> and store-rooms in twisted streets, and corner-people
> hiding, quick, quick, in their corners,
> and running back out of their corners.
>
> And in the warty darkness I slip
> down a hole to the icy pumphouse,
> I stumble, I eat dead air,
> crows fly off, feverish.
>
> And I gasp after them, beating
> on some frozen wood basket:
> —I want a reader! someone to talk to! a doctor!
> Oh, on that thorny stairway—if I could have a real conversation!

We expect city streets around where we live to offer welcome encounters with neighbors and friends, but in this city of exiles, such human engagement is maddeningly impossible. In the depths of winter, people's attitudes towards one another have turned cold and inhumane.

Mandelstam's "icy pumphouse" and "frozen wooden basket" show how the time of year may influence the perception or meaning of a street or trail. Connie Soper's "New Year, Cape Falcon," conflates the physical qualities of the Cape Falcon trail in early January with the emotional qualities of an unblemished new year whose calendar's little white squares are "erased of appointments, obligation, ennui." The speaker says, "Today, the world is rinsed clean," then looks to the future as she describes the trail:

> The trail curves an arc
> like a new promise.

Highway's hum surrenders
to Short Sand Creek's spill over bedrock
in its final urgent journey: water
to water. Black boulders slick as seals
jut from puddles the size

of small ponds. The old forest uncorks
a soggy carpet: twigs, branches, seedlings taking hold.
Twisted roots poke through mud
like the knobby faces of gnomes.
Boots *plop plop* a wet sucking noise.
Across a log bridge, the sweet smell
of newly felled wood. We spot an owl.
Switchbacks tunnel a thicket glistening
with salal and bracken fern

The path opens to brink of Pacific's
immensity; all empty space, water, future.
Without wings we can go no further,
mudbound in this soup that is half-earth, half-sky.

The metaphors arise from this particular oceanside environment ("black boulders slick as seals"), from this festive champagne-oriented time of year ("the old forest uncorks"), and from the familiarity of home and garden ("a soggy carpet," roots like "the knobby faces of gnomes," and the trail a "soup"). Blending the holiday season, the winter's rainy weather, the soggy and exposed-root terrain, and the day of the year, the speaker draws out of her experience of the Cape Falcon trail a statement of hope and promise for the new year. What other poems might be drawn out of other trails of the Northwest and at other times of the year?

Most Northwest trails could use similar attention, being "underwritten" (if written about at all). Many trails built by CCC crews in the 1930s as part of the New Deal have been haphazardly maintained

or abandoned or lost due to budget cuts to agencies—especially state parks and the US Forest Service—tasked with managing our public lands. Trails are now maintained mostly by volunteers in such groups as the Pacific Crest Trail Association, Washington Trails Association, Trailkeepers of Oregon, and many smaller groups who must all do their own fundraising. Every poem about a Pacific Northwest trail establishes its character, its complexity, and its significance a bit more, making more obvious its need for care.

Longer roads and trails lend themselves to more linear poetic narratives. There's Gary Snyder's "The Circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais," an account of the fifteen-mile, daylong ritual walk "up and around the long ridge" of Marin County's Mount Tamalpais on October 22, 1965, which he made with Allen Ginsberg and Philip Whalen. They stopped at ten "stations" along the trail to sing songs and chant invocations and sutras, leading to a ten-section poem, form matching content. "Stage One" begins:

> Muir Woods: the bed of Redwood Creek just where the Dipsea Trail crosses it. Even in the dryest season of this year some running water. Mountains make springs.
>
> Prajñāpāramitā-hridaya-sūtra
> Dhāranī for Removing Disasters
> Four Vows
>
> Splash across the creek and head up the Dipsea Trail, the steep wooded slope and into meadows. Gold dry grass. Cows—a huge pissing, her ears out, looking around with large eyes and mottled nose. As we laugh. . . .

Snyder provides specific names (Muir Woods, Redwood Creek, Dipsea Trail), describes the landscape of the trail ("steep wooded slope," "meadows," "Gold dry grass"), and tells of the "huge pissing" of a cow they encounter, making clear this is not a backcountry wilderness. He

balances the chanting of the sutra with laughter, which conveys the hikers' emotional states along the trail. It's no wonder that, helped in part by Snyder's poem, first published in 1966, and Philip Whalen's poem of the hike, "Opening the Mountain, Tamalpais: 22:x:65," hundreds of people every year have ritually walked the same route for over half a century now.

Seattle writer David Guterson, best known for his novel *Snow Falling on Cedars,* stretches his account of a backpacking trek along trails in the Olympic Mountains to 139 pages of somewhat bumpy five-line stanzas rich with assonance and alliteration in his *Turn Around Time.* His poem identifies and describes geologic features and flora and fauna (sometimes at length, using accurate terminology, with opinions on a plant or animal's character). Guterson mixes antique language (and purple prose filled with asides and esoteric references) with the vocabulary of hiking in the mountains; in one four-stanza passage, we *get bivouac, sign-in, walking stick, crevice-catching point, anorak, moleskin, iodine tablets, flint and steel, sternum-strap, and tumpline.* Such copious mountain- and hiking-specific vocabulary evokes the experience in a way well fitted to a place-based poetry of trails.

Road and trail poems can become more manageable and significantly less than 139 pages long when they center on a single central experience that focuses our attention on a telling aspect of the route. In "The Moose," Elizabeth Bishop recounts a 1946 bus trip from Nova Scotia westward, piling detail upon detail even before the bus starts. Underway in nighttime darkness, the bus soon crosses the isthmus into New Brunswick with more details of sights, smells, and sounds:

> A pale flickering. Gone.
> The Tantramar marshes
> and the smell of salt hay.
> An iron bridge trembles
> and a loose plank rattles
> but doesn't give way.

On the left, a red light
swims through the dark:
a ship's port lantern.
Two rubber boots show,
illuminated, solemn.
A dog gives one bark.

The bus enters woods which are "hairy, scratchy, splintery; / moonlight and mist / caught in them like lamb's wool / on bushes in a pasture." Passengers quietly talk among themselves in the darkness, with the speaker of the poem catching only bits and pieces of conversation, until the main event, when, "—Suddenly the bus driver / stops with a jolt / turns off his lights." A moose has come onto the road and walks up to smell the bus's hot hood. Bishop describes the moose with a series of similes relating to the familiar human world: It's "high as a church, / homely as a house / (or, safe as houses)." That's our comfortable starting point, and then Bishop presents the reactions of other passengers: "Perfectly harmless. . . . ," "Sure are big creatures," "It's awful plain," "Look! It's a she!" "Curious creatures." Bishop does more than just describe: She probes the relationship between what humans feel and this "otherworldly" manifestation of wild nature:

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

Bishop's question remains unanswered in the poem, which ends with the speaker craning her neck backward to keep the moose in sight "on the moonlit macadam" until there's only the smell of moose and the smell of gasoline. Those last sensory details keep us on that section of road, pondering the question.

Perhaps the biggest problem with road and trail poems is that the writer has little knowledge of the area through which the route passes. Descriptions in such "tourist" poems tend toward the generic: What's seen has only the most superficial historical or cultural context, innocent of the landscape's complexity and contradictions. Tim Gillespie's "Sandy Boulevard" illustrates how vitalizing such background knowledge can be to make real the "invisible landscape" of a route. Walking up Sandy Boulevard, "the only diagonal road" in his neighborhood, the speaker of the poem tells us that he has heard that it follows "an ancient path / ground to sand by hide-clad feet, / a time-worn route of Chinookan peoples" between the Willamette and Columbia rivers:

> This portageway linked   for long centuries
> rich fishing spots, Celilo   Falls to Whilamut Falls,
> the car-spawning road of   today hewing to that
> history of trade and travel,   though those cataracts
> are long gone, dammed up   now and well tamed,
> the street an anomaly, the old   scar cut across our
> invasion of condos and graph-   papered streets.

The historical and cultural context provided here, enriched by the older vocabulary of "portageway" and older spelling of "Whilamut Falls," brings alive a past that transports the speaker—who is bodily involved in the landscape as he walks up the road's "slow rise"—such that the buildings fall away, the concrete dissolves, the truck and car fumes fade, and the speaker continues with "promise of potlatch and dust of the trail in my mouth." Visually presenting a diagonal route down the page of the text, the poem does more than just describe and evoke a past; it also implicitly criticizes the "invasion" by the culture occupying the landscape now, which has displaced the original inhabitants, dammed up and tamed the cataracts and falls, diminished what were once "rich fishing" spots, and filled the area with vehicle fumes and "road rush." A political underpinning often adds additional strength to a poem of place.

Clem Starck also obliquely questions our cultural values in his road-based poem "Driving 99W, Reflecting on War and Solid Waste Disposal," in which the speaker imagines how people of the future will understand the meaning of the landscape on one section of road. "On 99W, about halfway / between Lewisburg and Suver Junction," he says, "I pull over sometimes to read / the historical markers that commemorate / Camp Adair." Those markers tell that it's the "Site of the cantonment / where four infantry divisions trained for combat / in World War II." On the other side of the highway is the local landfill, where thousands of tons of "solid waste" is dumped every day, and then

> pushed into shape by bulldozers,
> and overlaid with glistening black plastic,
> as though it were
> a preservation sight.

Starck's last stanza ties together the sites on either side of the highway:

> So maybe someday what they'll say is: Once
> there was a war here
> and this is where the victors
> stockpiled
> their plunder.

Starck's jump to the point of view of future visitors who don't share our cultural assumptions seems at first humorous, considering their obvious misunderstanding of what's valuable and what's not. Upon a moment's reflection, though, it comes across as an all too accurate and embarrassing depiction of our values: We throw away immense amounts of repairable appliances, still-edible food, and items that were superfluous in the first place; and much of our solid waste is composed of goods produced by countries we were once at war with, whose workers often toil under miserable conditions in order that the cost to us remains low—a kind of continuing "plunder" long after

combat has ended.

The "invisible landscape" of a road or trail needn't be historical or cultural, but could well be personal, residing only in the mind of the individual traversing the route. That's the case of Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh's poem that concludes his novel *Tarry Flynn*, set in the 1930s. The novel's title character, Tarry, is "visualizing a scene that took shape as a song," one "apple-ripe September morning" when he was on his way to the threshing mill at Cassidy's farm. One place after another along the route conjures a memory, enriching the joyful meaning of each place for him in these three middle stanzas:

> As I crossed the wooden bridge I wondered
> As I looked into the drain
> If ever a summer morning should find me
> Shovelling up eels again.
>
> And I thought of the wasps' nest in the bank
> And how I got chased one day
> Leaving the drag and the scraw-knife behind,
> How I covered my face with hay.
>
> The wet leaves of the cocksfoot
> Polished my boots as I
> Went round by the glistening bog-holes
> Lost in unthinking joy.

The jubilation of the speaker at each stage of the route is unmistakable. In the last lines, as he comes to Cassidy's gate, he tells us that "I knew as I entered that I had come / Through fields that were part of no earthly estate." Each of the experiences centers on an interaction with the natural world—shoveling eels, running from a wasps' nest in the bank, or passing bog-holes as leaves of cocksfoot—a bunchgrass also known as orchard grass or cat's grass—polish his boots. The joy of the speaker might make a reader wish for the same experiences.

Empathy, a quality notably missing in current political discourse, plays an important role in Maxine Scates' poem of the drive on Oregon 38 "from the valley along the Umpqua through Drain" on the way to North Bend. Throughout "Listening to *La Traviata* While Crossing into North Bend," the speaker remembers "Rodney and his promise / and how he died one night driving his small car / the wrong way down the highway into a semi," while noting features along the road that testify to the current economics and politics of the day:

> I have
> passed the elk kneeling in the fields of Elkton
> where fenceposts bear red and white signs
> of welcome home for local soldiers two days
> before the 4th. The houses there are high on the banks
> along the river and the rowboats tied to the small docks
> below. I thought of those who go—the sun-glassed
> faces, the body armor—how they cannot imagine
> where they are going because all they know
> is they have to leave the river, and the rowboats
> and the towns with no work. . . .

Here, the time of year—two days before Independence Day and its celebrations—connects to local soldiers returning to the small town and its lack of jobs: not a great deal to celebrate about that. As the poem's speaker crosses "one of the last WPA bridges on the coast" over the mudflats of Coos Bay into North Bend, the poem ends with the outsized drama of the opera she's listening to,

> a backdrop to the greater drama of this port town,
> its rusting barges and its barges full
> of wood chips, its Old Town for the tourists,
> its stream of cars turning one by one into the Mill Casino.

The visual features explain this town's way of surviving economic

crises, with barges of woodchips (rather than the giant trees of the past, we might infer), an Old Town geared to tourists rather than residents, and perhaps most important, not a lumber mill, but the Mill Casino, attracting a stream of cars. Scates doesn't need to explain about the struggles of the towns and their residents because the details she notes do that work, with her mourning for Rodney and the tragedy of *La Traviata* providing an apt emotional atmosphere.

There are many kinds of roads and many kinds of trails waiting to be observed more closely, reflected on, and written about. In *The 99% Invisible City*, radio show host and podcaster Roman Mars and his co-author Kurt Kohlstedt identify items we might see along city streets but never really notice or understand the meaning of—such as the spray-painted abbreviations on pavement, the break-away bases of street signs, the armrests positioned on public benches to thwart attempts to lie down and sleep. They provide specific terminology, as in their list of eighteen kinds of roads we travel, distinguishing between a street (which has buildings on either side), a boulevard (a wide street with a median and side vegetation) and a drive (long and winding and shaped by the natural environment). There many kinds of trails needing poems, from round-the-mountain trails such as the Loowit (Mount St. Helens), Wonderland (Mount Rainier) and Timberline (Mount Hood) to the increasing number of flat and often paved "rails-to-trails" with rich histories, such as the Fanno Creek Trail (on the old Oregon Electric Railway line in Portland) and the Olympic Discovery Trail (on the old Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific Railroad line on the Olympic Peninsula), and water trails for canoes and kayaks such as the Cascadia Marine Trail on the Salish Sea and Tualatin River Water Trail.

As we say goodbye to our pandemic winter and welcome spring, it seems appropriate to close with a century-and-a-half-old poem by English Romantic poet John Clare, "Sonnet: On a Lane in Spring," which considers how the season is altering a country lane:

> A little lane, the brook runs close beside,
> And spangles in the sunshine, while the fish glide sweetly by;

And hedges leafing with the green spring tide:
From out their greenery the old birds fly,
And chirp and whistle in the morning sun:
The pilewort glitters 'neath the pale blue sky,
The little robin has its nest begun
And grass-green linnets round the bushes fly.
How mild the spring comes in! The daisy buds
Lift up their golden blossoms to the sky.
How lovely are the pingles and the woods!
Here a beetle runs, and there a fly
Rests on the arum leaf in bottle green,
And all the spring in this green lane is seen.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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