

Afterword

Discovering Home: Readings on “a Sense of Place”

Since we started *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place*, we've participated in many discussions about the idea of what a “poetry of place” might be. In our afterwords for each issue, we've been suggesting and exploring possibilities. In this afterword, we walk through a handful of texts which have shaped our views. Though most of them discuss nonfiction prose rather than poetry, the ideas apply well to poetry. Our intention is to work toward some shared understandings of “a sense of place” and to consciously put aside some definitions of “a sense of place” which seem less useful for our purposes. Lawrence Buell comments on “how hard it is for writers to do justice to place, even when they respect it.” Our intention is to encourage poetry which does justice to place in the Northwest, capturing a sense of particular places and our often complex relations to them.

Some of the treatments of place we're not pursuing are relatively easy to describe. First, we're not considering “place” as synonymous with “space.” “Space” tends to be generic and moveable, more a matter of enclosure than rootedness. We can recreate our homes or our offices and we can build a new restaurant or school in various locales and make them almost identical to our last home, office, restaurant or school. Many large corporations specialize in constructing identical “spaces” again and again in places which are themselves unique. Our focus is on that often overlooked uniqueness of places.

We're also not considering place as a repository of images to help us describe our emotional or psychological states; we're not interested in using place metaphorically in service to a focus on ourselves. Though our emotional states often have a lot to do with the places we experience them, our emphasis is on the place and our interactions with it and relationships to it, rather than on ourselves. And we're definitely not interested in made-up, imaginary places, or places which are a composite of parts of real places, important as such places are in many fictional works. We're also purposely avoiding archetypal or mythic treatment of places like “home,” “temple,” or “battlefield.” Another treatment of place we're not interested in is what might be described as local boosterism, the xenophobic, myopic

“regionalism” which is blind to the less noble aspects of a place and ignores its relation to the rest of the world.

A good starting point for what would go into a poetry of place might be Wallace Stegner, who in “A Sense of Place” contrasts the romantic American vagabond with what he calls “the placed person.” Much as we all want at times to be totally free and independent and mobile, he says, it’s the placed person who is more fully human. Using his own childhood placelessness as a starting point, Stegner recognizes that there are multiple paths to becoming placed, saying, “Some are born in their place, some find it, some realize after long searching that the place they left is the one they have been searching for”; adopted places are fine. Stegner also offers an antidote to those who think that all place-writing is nature-writing. Stegner asserts that it’s people experiencing and shaping a place that makes a place a “place.” Then it’s the role of writers to remind us of the interacting of people and places: “No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments,” and, even more to our purpose, “no place is a place until it has had a poet.”

John Brinckerhoff Jackson in *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* provides a technique for jarring us into seeing familiar places in new ways. Many poets depend upon travel to encourage seeing life with “new eyes” and becoming more open to experience; a jarring dislocation usually heightens our awareness. Jackson’s discussion might speed up the process of seeing our local places more vividly. With photographs and well-described examples, he contrasts the “official landscape” we are encouraged to see by the dominant culture with the “vernacular landscape” of everyday people’s everyday use. He contrasts, for instance, the “official” regional or national road systems (our interstates and Roman highways such as the Appian Way) which impose themselves on the landscape by slicing straight through marshes and hills, with the “vernacular” local roads (originally paths and trails) following natural contours and serving the needs of nearby residents. “We have become almost blind” to some landscapes, he says; our cultural values give “official” elements great visibility and render “vernacular” elements almost invisible. Jackson emphasizes the demotic, common, “vernacular” elements of landscape which are so often overlooked by everyone, including poets.

Occasionally we receive submissions accompanied by notes suggesting

that we may not be interested in some of the poems because they're set in cities rather than in "nature." We're actually not interested in "nature" poems *per se* as much as we're interested in "place" poems, and building villages, towns, and cities is one of the ways people have always established a sense of place and their identities in a place. How do we overcome our cultural tendency to see landscapes as extremes, as either "nature" or "city"? Writing about cities very well may involve nature, just as writing about natural areas may involve city-like human activities. Like John Brinckerhoff Jackson, Robert Michael Pyle directs our attention toward particular kinds of "unofficial" landscapes in and around urban areas. In "The Extinction of Experience," Pyle emphasizes the value of the "hand-me-down habitats," "throwaway landscapes," "waste ground," and "ignominious, degraded, forgotten places" on the edges of development in otherwise urban areas. These places, which he calls "secondary lands,"—such as ditchbanks, vacant lots, old quarries, unbuildable lots, abandoned farms and railroad right-of-ways—are the places where people, kids especially, have always interacted with nature, able to catch bugs, trap crawdads, dig tunnels, whack down ferns, cut through the trunks of small trees to count the rings, and examine and observe the natural world as it lives in our midst—"places that are not kid-proofed, where children can do damage and come back the following year to see the results." Pyle contrasts this engagement with the obliviousness of many people and the detachment of many nature lovers, who admire only the "official" natural world sanctioned by Sierra Club calendars, the *noli me tangere* parks, forests, and preserves posted with signs to "take only pictures and leave only footprints." Pyle encourages us not to overlook the somewhat sullied natural landscapes in our urban homes.

Another writer who encourages us to see our local place more clearly is Henry David Thoreau, perhaps the most thorough of American place-based writers. In *Walden*, his journals, and his essays, Thoreau provides rationale and examples for getting to know one place well. He crisscrossed his long-settled community on foot throughout his life, becoming, as he said, "well traveled in Concord." In his great essay "Walking," he presents his methods of learning a landscape, beginning with a tongue-in-cheek explanation of the word "sauntering." Thoreau's walking is an art, involving an absolute concentration on the present and freedom from cares of

everyday life. "What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?" he asks. Though he has walked almost every day for years in the same vicinity, he continues to discover new views, and "two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see." He asserts that the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, "or the limits of an afternoon walk," provides enough material for new discoveries for a lifetime of walks. It is the walks which provide material and method for poetry: "He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring . . . ; who derived his words as often as he used them, —transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots."

Many discussions of place-based writing inevitably turn toward Native American literatures for examples and theories. One of the most articulate explainers of place-based writing is the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko. In her essay "Interior and Exterior Landscapes," Silko explains and illustrates how stories and the familiar, nearby landscape depend on one another in pueblo storytelling. In both traditional and contemporary stories, landscape almost always plays a significant role, Silko says: "The places where the stories occur are precisely located, and prominent geographical details recalled, even if the landscape is well known to listeners, often because the turning point in the narrative involved a peculiarity of the special quality of a rock or tree or plant found only at that place." The landscape is not just a backdrop, but an essential element of a story. The landscape feature reminds a viewer of the stories involving it, and of everyone who appears in the stories. Silko's landscape is a peopled landscape, making the landscape "home." She says that even as a child riding horseback into the hills miles from her home, she was not alone: "I carried with me the feeling I'd acquired from listening to the old stories, that the land all around me was teeming with creatures that were related to human beings and to me." The landscape is never an "other" apart from humans. The landscape can't really even be considered without people in it, and stories can't be credibly told without the landscape as part of the story.

Anthropologist Keith Basso examines how Western Apache stories relate to the landscape in which the tribe lives. In "Stalking with Stories"

Basso quotes a number of Apaches who assert, for instance, that “The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us. The land looks after people.” Most Apache stories, Basso explains, begin with a reference to a particular feature of the landscape—an exactly named butte, mesa, river, or other element. The place-names are the starting point for understanding Apache stories and value-systems. Most of the Apache place-names also are in the form of complete sentences which describe the place, often centering on an event which occurred in the place, as in stories which begin, “It happened at ‘coarse-textured rocks lie above in a compact cluster,’” and “It happened at ‘men stand above here and there.’” Basso unravels an Apache way of interconnecting stories, places, names, events, people, and moral standards far more complex than anything yet in Anglo-American poetry.

Barry Lopez in “Landscape and Narrative” also looks to native storytellers for lessons in connecting landscape and story, beginning with Cree storytellers in a remote village in the Brooks Range of Alaska. “Landscape,” as Lopez uses the term, means the local landscape of the tellers and listeners of the stories, what we’re often meaning by the term “place.” Someone learns a landscape finally, Lopez says, “not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it,” such as the relationship of a particular kind of bird (black-throated sparrow) landing in a particular bush (paloverde). That’s what Lopez calls the “external landscape,” as opposed to the interior landscape, which is “a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape.” The “speculations, intuitions, and formal ideas we refer to as ‘mind’ are a set of relationships in the interior landscape” and are influenced by the exterior landscapes we have experienced, Lopez says. Though much of our understanding of the relationships within the exterior landscape is below the level of consciousness, we do know our own past as we’ve lived it in the land (“even a life in the city”). In addition, Lopez says, we order our interior landscape according to our moral, intellectual, and spiritual development. So, ultimately, “The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes.” At *Windfall*, we’re especially interested in exploring how these ideas of Lopez’s might be applied in poetry being written today—if our minds are structured in part by the

landscapes we've interacted with and poetry is a reflection of our minds, then how might poems be structured by those who have experienced Northwest landscapes?

In her largely autobiographical "A Sense of Place," Maxine Kumin gives a similar importance to the natural world. "If I am to write poems constructed from words arranged in their natural word order in the conversational tone of voice used between consenting adults, I need the centrality of the natural world to draw on," she says. The importance of knowing a place well is a starting point for other concerns, she says. "In a poem, one can use the sense of place as an anchor for larger concerns, as a link between narrow details and global realities. Location is where we start from." She makes clear that the place need not be the center of a poem, but an element which enables the poem to come into being. Knowing a place well also furnishes a poet with images, metaphors, and archetypes that resonate with authenticity. ("I dislike abstraction in poetry," Kumin says bluntly.) Kumin also raises the question of gender, asking, "Is there something gender-specific about a woman writer's sense of place?" She answers yes, that women's writing about female relationships—mother-daughter, sister-sister—presents feelings "touched and colored by the outside setting."

One of the most popular of place-based writers, the poet Gary Snyder has tirelessly and consistently promoted place-based thinking and shaped the terms of discourse about place. In "The Place, the Region, and the Commons," Snyder says that "It is not enough just to 'love nature' or want to 'be in harmony with Gaia.' Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience." Most Americans have no "home place" about which they know a great deal and have no "easy familiarity" with local plants or animals, he says. Besides encouraging "bioregionalism" and a knowledge of "watersheds," Snyder urges a "visualization" of the region in which we live in order to begin to be at home in the landscape, without which we aren't actually living here "intellectually, imaginatively, or morally."

A word needs to be said about the work of two insightful literary critics who might be added to this list of poets and writers. Lawrence Buell in "The Place of Place" gives a terrific and learned overview of the interest in literature of place. And while not specifically about literature of place, Glen

Love's "Revaluing Nature: Towards an Ecological Criticism" provides an enthusiastic and encouraging overview of ways we have talked about landscape literature and suggestions for how we might look at it now, with our new understandings about human relationships to the environment brought to us courtesy of global warming, depleted ozone layer, and acid rain, among other sponsors.

The texts discussed in this afterword are probably the core non-fictional, non-poetic works to have formed our thinking here at *Windfall* of "a sense of place." We've also of course been influenced by the fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry in which these writers as well as many others such as Wendell Berry and Scott Russell Sanders have demonstrated their ideas of "place." And the list of Northwest poets and writers who have dealt with place in their creative writing is extensive. But these dozen or so texts are excellent starting points for exploring what Nick O'Connell calls the "primary subject" of a distinctive Northwest literature: the relationship between people and place.

Bill Siverly & Michael McDowell

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