Afterword

The Tao of Place

Windfall has welcomed poems that celebrate the human relation to natural places. Such poems also suggest their opposite, poems that explore our alienation from "nature" or how we dwell in urban places, and *Windfall* has also published a number of those. Calvin Martin claims that our alienation from "the Surround" began more than ten thousand years ago, when farming and settled communities gradually replaced our nomadic hunter-gatherer mode of existence. As Martin puts it, "From the farming view there would in time develop, depending on location, an increasingly urbanized and secularized, and eventually mechanized and industrialized conception of the earth."

Today we find ourselves in the later stages of such developments, an economic or "virtual" relation to earth, to the point that the continuity of the biosphere and human life itself is threatened. Martin and others have said that we must find our way to a more sustainable relationship with nature, one that more resembles the way of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers, wherein concepts like "nature" and "environment" had not yet emerged because humanity deemed itself fully integrated into the Surround. We at *Windfall* assume that poetry can contribute to a renewal of that integrated awareness, so we encourage poetry that seeks new ways to address the reality of place and human dwelling therein.

China's history and language have produced poetry within a philosophical framework that reaches back to Paleolithic prehistory. Translator David Hinton maintains that the foundations of the *Tao te ching* predate its supposed author Lao Tzu by centuries. Lao Tzu recast the already ancient concept of "the Way" (*tao*) in spiritual and ontological terms as the process by which all things rise and pass away, including the self. Hinton says a key term of Lao Tzu is *tzu-jan*, which translates "'occurrence appearing of itself,' for it is meant to describe the ten thousand things burgeoning forth spontaneously from the generative source, each according to its own nature, independent and self-sufficient, each dying and returning to the process of change, only to reappear in another self-generating form." All things, including consciousness, burgeon forth from their origin, which is nonbeing, to which all things return—hence nonbeing lies at the generative heart of the Cosmos and of consciousness also.

Hinton remarks on the similarity of the Taoist worldview to modern ecological thinking, with its emphasis upon the interrelatedness of living things and attention to particular of individuals within the system. A poet, whether native in one place or visitor to many places within a bioregion, could find in such a worldview inspiration for poems of place. We at *Windfall* are always open to poems of Northwest *tzu-jan*, the more specific and detailed, the better.

Hinton evokes the response of Chinese artists to Lao Tzu's spiritual ecology: "Calligraphers, poets, and painters aspired to create with the selfless spontaneity of a natural force, and the elements out of which they crafted their artistic visions were primarily aspects of the 'natural world:' moon and stars, rivers and mountains, fields and gardens." Two poets in particular are considered the grandfathers of such rivers-and-mountains poetry, T'ao Ch'ien (365-427) and Hsieh Ling-yün (385-433).

T'ao Ch'ien was "the first writer to make poetry of his natural voice and immediate experience." And the key experience of T'ao Ch'ien's life was failure—failure, that is, to make a success of service at court to which all members of the educated class aspired. Instead, after several troublesome appointments, T'ao Ch'ien became a recluse-farmer in his ancestral village of Ch'ai-sang:

> home again. I've got nearly two acres here,
> and four or five rooms in this thatch hut,
>
> elms and willows shading the eaves in back,
> and in front, peach and plum spread wide.
>
> Villages lost across mist-and-haze distances,
> kitchen smoke drifting wide-open country,
>
> dogs bark deep among back roads out here,
> and roosters crow from mulberry treetops.
>
> No confusion within these gates, no dust,
> my empty home harbors idleness to spare.

Back again: after so long caged in that trap.
I've returned to occurrence coming of itself.

—from "Home Again Among Fields and Gardens"
translated by David Hinton

The figure of the poet withdrawing from worldly pursuit in favor of spiritual and artistic refinement in natural surroundings became the primary *persona* of subsequent Chinese poetry. The gates in the next-to-last section of the poem are a common figure signifying the recluse, and dust signifies the corrupted world that the recluse withdraws from. Idleness (*wu-wei*, "doing nothing") is a Taoist term for arriving at the state of nonbeing within oneself. "Occurrence coming of itself" is *tzu-jan*, the burgeoning forth that the recluse happily observes from his idleness.

T'ao Ch'ien is traditionally considered the founder of fields-and-gardens poetry, in contrast to rivers-and-mountains. Hinton says this can be a useful distinction—peopled landscape vs. unpeopled wilderness—but in terms of Taoist cosmology there is no real difference, and "rivers-and-mountains" ultimately includes both categories. Perhaps the distinction between fields-and-gardens and rivers-and-mountains is more important to us, especially in the Northwest, in our current divide over urban growth boundaries or wilderness designation. Few of us can experience the same place in the same way over a lifetime because of vast changes in land-use. *Windfall* has received a number of poems on such changes, and yet the possibilities of emotional response seem inexhaustible.

The other grandfather of Chinese lyric poetry, Hsieh Ling-yün, was a son (later the patriarch) of one of the most illustrious families of the day. Inevitably, he was swept into political infighting during perilous times. At age thirty-seven he found himself exiled to Yung-chia on the southeast coast of China. In this spectacular mountain wilderness, Hsieh Ling-yün deepened his Taoist and Buddhist study, neglected his official duties, trekked through forests and climbed mountains, and wrote the rivers-and-mountains poetry that made him famous. Hinton says, "As with China's great landscape paintings, Hsieh's mountain landscapes enact 'nonbeing mirroring the whole,' rendering a world that is profoundly spiritual, and at the same time, resolutely realistic in its extensive descriptions." Here is part of section 36 of his long poem, "Dwelling in the Mountains":

Gazing on and on in reverence
across realms so boundless away,

I come to the twin rivers that flow through together.
Two springs sharing one source,

they follow gorges and canyons
to merge at mountain headlands

and cascade on, scouring sand out and mounding dunes
below peaks that loom over islands swelling into hills,

whitewater carrying cliffs away in a tumble of rocks,
a marshy tangle of fallen trees glistening in the waves.

Following along the south bank that crosses out front,
the snaking north cliff that looms behind, I'm soon

lost in thick forests, the nature of dawn and dusk in full view,
and for bearings, I trust myself to the star-filled night skies.

And from section 29:

Looking into these towering forests hundreds of years old,
I inhabit the savory fragrance of ten thousand passing ages,

and turning to the fresh springs of all boundless antiquity,
treasure the inexhaustible clarity of their glistening liquid.

Leaving behind the elegant towers that stand outside cities
and the human enterprise bustling inside every village wall,

I delight here in origin's weave, embrace uncarved simplicity,
heaven and earth mingling sweet dew in these fields of the Way.
—translated by David Hinton

Hsieh, though exiled, treats his situation as voluntary withdrawal from worldly endeavor, like T'ao Ch'ien. The "uncarved simplicity" of the next-to-last line refers to the *Tao te ching*, wherein "uncarved" represents nonbeing, or the potential for emergence. As Hinton remarks, "It is an austere poetry, nearly devoid of the human stories and poetic strategies that normally make poems engaging. Hsieh's central personal 'story' is the identification of enlightenment with wilderness, and this is why Hsieh has been so admired in China." Reading him today, we can marvel how a poet, living an engaged life in "interesting " times, may still manage to pursue his deepest spiritual work through the poetry of rivers and mountains. Could we remove ourselves from our poems so radically to mirror the world around us? Paradoxically, in doing so, we reveal our lives and times through imagery.

The T'ang Dynasty (618-907) produced the greatest literary achievements in ancient China, in the work of such poets as Wang Wei, Li Po, Tu Fu (Du Fu), Han Yü Po Chü-i, Han-shan, and Chia Tao. Western poets are already familiar with the work of most of these through the efforts of diligent twentieth-century translators Arthur Waley, Ezra Pound, Burton Watson, Kenneth Rexroth, and Gary Snyder.

Tu Fu certainly lived in interesting times. Tu held a minor post at Ch'ang-an in the most culturally refined courts of the Dynasty. In Tu's forty-fourth year, the An Lu-shan rebellion broke out, which shook the Dynasty to its foundations. For the remaining fifteen years of his life, Tu and his wife and children wandered from town to town, trying to avoid warfare, chaos, and famine. They never lived more than a year in any one place, but many of his fourteen hundred poems that have come down to us can be sequenced according to places along his way. Like Dante, who was exiled from Florence and wandered around Italy for twenty years while writing the *Divine Comedy*, Tu Fu's work is synonymous with the beloved topography of his country, as well as the suffering of its people. Even while living in a place short-term, Tu Fu treated it as if it were his final place of residence, sensitive to its local detail. Here is a poem from his time in Ch'ang-an not long after the rebellion had broken out, titled "Spring Prospect":

> The nation shattered, mountains and rivers remain;
> City in spring, grass and trees burgeoning.

Feeling the times, blossoms draw tears;
Hating separation, birds alarm the heart.
Beacon fires three months in succession,
A letter from home worth ten thousand in gold.
White hairs, fewer for the scratching,
Soon too few to hold a hairpin up.
—translated by Burton Watson

David Hinton says the first line (which he translates "The nation falls into ruins; mountains and rivers continue") is one of the most famous lines in Chinese poetry, evocative of transformation and stability at the same time. By the end of the same short poem, Tu has, in his typical way, brought the broad sweep of "the nation shattered" down to a humble concrete image: the hairpin that holds the cap on his head fails to function because so much hair will be lost in worrisome times.

Hinton says, "Tu's work articulates exile in this world of rivers and mountains, but also the exile we all share in a wilderness cosmology of relentless transformation—for we are, like all things, just fleeting forms already on their way somewhere else." Though war does not currently ravage our country, many of us have wandered, and the newcomer to a place may express things the natives would never notice.

In the following century the advance of Zen Buddhism and of the recluse ideal achieved their most notable expression in the work of the T'ang poet Han-shan, whose name evokes the place where he lived: Cold Mountain. Little is known of Han-shan, though his work suggests a highly educated exile from life at court in Ch'ang-an, and translator Red Pine suggests that this very exile in politically dangerous times may account for his anonymity. Han-shan became entirely identified with his place of reclusion, and legend says that at his death, he disappeared within a cleft of the mountain, leaving his poems written on trees, rocks, and walls of a local temple and village. These poems were collected, to number about three hundred, all untitled, all quite brief:

Since I came to Cold Mountain
how many thousand years have passed
accepting my fate I fled to the woods

to dwell and gaze in freedom
no one visits the cliffs
forever hidden by clouds
soft grass serves as a mattress
my quilt is the dark blue sky
a boulder makes a fine pillow
Heaven and Earth can crumble and change
—translated by Red Pine

As in many poems by Han-shan and subsequent recluse-poets, white clouds (also mist and fog) represent no-mind, that ideal state of nonbeing. The poem reads well as a direct call to find the true Way in anonymity, a classic of Taoist and Buddhist aspiration to emptiness. Han-shan the recluse on a single mountain is the opposite of Tu Fu the wanderer, and he makes us ask different questions about place: How and to what degree does where we are determine who we are?

The poet Chia Tao (779-843) was born into a poor family at Fan-yang, a village near modern Beijing, in the wake of destruction left by the An Lu-shan rebellion twenty-four years before—a period of great suffering, but also of the greatest development of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. At age thirty-one Chia Tao left the monastery and began a life of wandering through the mountains and rivers of China. Of his surviving four hundred poems, about one hundred concern parting. His aims in poetry were cool and precise, attempting to evoke Zen spirituality in terms of mountain wilderness. His most famous poem, says his translator Mike O'Connor, evokes "the heart and soul of this eremitic tradition."

SEEKING BUT NOT FINDING THE RECLUSE

Under pines
I ask the boy;

He says, "My master's gone
to gather herbs.

I only know
he's on the mountain,

but the clouds are too deep
to know where."

—translated by Mike O'Connor

Chia Tao's spare rivers-and-mountains imagery, his somber tone, and the autumn and winter settings (these seasons considered closer to the Taoist ideal of nonbeing than the *tzu-jan* of burgeoning spring and summer) became the inspiration of subsequent Zen poets. At the same time, when his wanderings take him there, Chia Tao looks back to one of the grandfathers of Chinese poetry, Hsieh Ling-yün, evoking the ancient tradition of poetry of place:

EARLY AUTUMN, SENT TO BE INSCRIBED ON THE WALL
AT SPIRIT-REFUGE MONASTERY ON INDIA MOUNTAIN

A monastery nestled into peaks all early autumn:
on a cragged summit, it looks out across Wu-Chou.

Deep in meditation, monks listen to cricket song,
and where nesting cranes were, monkeys frolic.

A mountain bell calls across empty river at dusk.
A shoreline moon, cold, rises over an old tower.

Mind unfurls its broad sails, but I'm still not here
in this place Hsieh Ling-yün long ago wandered.

—translated by David Hinton

Zen poets Han-shan and Chia Tao remind us of an ancient truth: If we would have peace in the Empire, we must first try to find it within, and then the poems of peace (and place) will come.

Bill Siverly & Michael McDowell

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