

Reconnecting

As current and former teachers of poetry workshops and editors of a poetry journal, we read hundreds of newly written poems a year. If there's one almost universal tendency that we recognize, it's the centering of the poem around the poet's own self and emotions. Writing from the ego, of course, has preoccupied writers and readers of poetry in Western culture for the last few centuries, particularly since the beginning of the Romantic era. At their best, the psychic journeys of those who have written poetry over the last two centuries reveal and reinforce the life of the individual against the threat of collective forces that rule an increasingly virtual world.

At *Windfall* we seek poems that chart a different and emergent path for poetry. We are looking for (and trying ourselves to write) poems that uncenter our minds from ourselves. In Jungian terms, we want poems that reconnect the ego to the unconscious in a positive way, because the unconscious represents earth itself in our psyches. As we see it, Western culture needs a poetry that integrates exterior reality with our concepts, our language, our psyches and our poetic techniques.

As the crickets' soft autumn hum
is to us,
so are we to the trees
as are they
to the rocks and hills
—Gary Snyder, "Little Songs for Gaia"

Snyder's little song represents a theme and point of view that are not widely shared in our time. When the ego is out of control, detached from its roots in the unconscious, then institutions, economics, militarism, nationalism, and war prevail, and culture itself supports an increasingly generic and virtual reality. As we spend increasing amounts of time working with our minds, much current poetry reflects our mind-centered lives, and is the weaker for it. The sustainability

of the earth and of human life on the earth are taken for granted, if not forgotten. For poetry to be meaningful in our time, it must reduce its service to the ego, including the poet's ego, as if the reader must identify with that alone. The era of art that flatters rulers, the rich, the citizen, the merchant, the technocrat, or even the individual is well in decline, if not over and done. Neither do we need to be CEO's in our own poems. We need poetry closer to Snyder's little song—that integrates psyche and landscape. A "poetry of place" requires that the poem actually live in a particular place, and experience the life which place enables, in its unique way.

THE GEOLOGY OF HOME

We live on the limb of an overturned fold,
a shadow zone come late afternoon
when the crest is set ablaze. Just past
the hinge line wild blackberry thrives,
draping itself around a bed of stones.
Nothing is ever guaranteed here.
The compressed earth beneath our house
can heave and bend like a lamb at play,
young enough to change in a flash.
This morning in a windless moment,
I saw stillness gather itself and abandon
first the grass, then the blotched iris,
tulips, fennel, twin oaks, feathery cirrus,
and finally the faint crook of a quarter moon.
—Floyd Skloot

As Skloot's poem suggests, home is the place one knows best, the place that will yield imagery of the greatest resonance. Poems about places we pass through on vacation, or poems about being on the road, are likely to render only superficial observations. Within a ten-mile radius of home, or "the limits of an afternoon walk," we can find "as strange a country as we could ever expect to see," Thoreau says. In a

lifetime, “it will never become quite familiar to you.” Certainly “place” must first of all refer to the distance we could reach in a world without oil, or in which oil is scarce and expensive, for such may well be the conditions for travel in coming generations.

Skloot draws from the landscape of his home in Amity, Oregon, and his poetic technique consists of imagery and a limited simile (“like a lamb at play”), while some of the language carries metaphorical overtones (“limb,” “set ablaze,” “draping,” and “stillness gather itself”). These are the essential techniques of poetry of place, and few others are needed. Surely Skloot’s poem also displays a careful sensitivity to sound and line, as all of his work does. But the fundamental strength of the poem relies on his careful attention to the exterior world before the poem was made.

Though the observer is announced in the poem by the single phrase “I saw,” attention in the poem embraces wholly the exterior world. The uncentered voice allows the imagery and the poem to achieve resonance within us, at the level of the unconscious. Even when a poem makes no reference at all to the observer or speaker, we assume the uncentered presence of the one who selects detail, the one who directs our attention, allowing the images to work:

NOW THAT WE LIVE

Fat spider by the door.

Brow of hayfield, blue
eye of pond.

Sky at night like an open well.

Whip-Poor-Will calls
in the tall grass:
I belong to the Queen of Heaven!

The cheerful worm
in the cheerful ground.

Regular shape of meadow and wall

under the blue
imperturbable mountain.
—Jane Kenyon

The poetry of place does not by any means require that the speaker be literally absent from the poem. Sometimes the speaker will be fully present in the lines, and yet will appear to think or feel entirely in terms of the external world, such as the Mediterranean world often evoked by Jack Gilbert:

MORE THAN SIXTY

Out of money, so I'm sitting in the shade
of my farmhouse cleaning the lentils
I found in the back of the cupboard.
Listening to the cicadas in the fig tree
mix with the cooing doves on the roof.
I look up when I hear a goat hurt far down
the valley and discover the sea
exactly the same blue I used to paint it
with my watercolors as a child.
So what, I think happily. So what!

In Gilbert's poem, the speaker allows himself to be prompted by the sounds and sights of the exterior world: cicadas, cooing doves, hurt goat, and blue sea. These lead him to a conclusion about his own life, and we sense a balance between the human ego-consciousness and the unconscious in its ancient, accumulated experience of the external world.

The key concept here is *balance*, and at *Windfall* we keep our eyes wide open for a kind of poetry we don't see enough of: poetry which restores the balance between ego-consciousness and the unconscious. Jungian authors, such as Erich Neumann, warn us that we live in the shadow of a dangerous schism between these two systems within the human psyche, wherein the equilibrium they normally maintain becomes imbalanced and the ego becomes detached from the

unconscious. How might poetry contribute to a restoration of balance? Such a restoration might include a realignment of our attention to the structure of poetry, which has suffered neglect in the predominance of free verse over the last hundred years, with the ego ranging freely line to line, from one block of lines to another.

Balance is the structure of poetry that emerges from the oral tradition, from the *Iliad* to Native American myth-telling. The term “ring composition” is often applied to such poetry, meaning parallelism when parallelism is the major structure of the work. An element (theme, concept, line, image-complex, figure of speech, or antithesis) is given parallel form at equal and opposite places in the work. Most commonly, a work might end where it began. Between such an ending and beginning, the second element might parallel the next-to-last element, and so on to the middle of the work. The middle line functions like a stone dropped into a pool, with the rings emanating outward.

We have explored adaptations of such structures for lyric poetry in previous *Windfall* afterwords (see volume 1, number 2, spring 2003, or the PDF file of the afterword on our web site, <<http://www.hevanet.com/windfall>>). We do not expect metrics and rhyme, which are later, more enclosed techniques, when, as Bringhurst puts it, poets come to “farm their language.” As fundamental prosody, lines and stanzas offer infinite possibilities for structural symmetry, echoing the ancient default sense of balance and its restoration:

THE TUNDRA

The tundra is a living
body, warm in the grassy
autumn sun; it gives off
the odor of crushed
blueberries and gunsmoke.

In the tangled lakes
of its eyes a mirror of ice
is forming, where

frozen gut-piles shine
with a dull, rosy light.

Coarse, laughing men
with their women;
one by one the tiny campfires
flaring under the wind.

Full of blood, with a sound
like clicking hoofs,
the heavy tundra slowly
rolls over and sinks
in the darkness.

—John Haines

In the first and last stanzas the tundra frames the human hunters in the middle stanzas, much as the unconscious frames all of our ego-intentional occupations upon the earth. The poem seems to turn on its middle line: “with a dull, rosy light.” The poet does not need to explain or “add meaning”—the balanced structure and imagery of the poem embody its meaning.

According to Erich Neumann, the process of ego-development, a positive development in the evolution of the psyche, has become negative under modernity. The schism between the ego and the unconscious has “gone beyond the formation of the individual personality and given rise to an atomized individualism.” Neumann distinguishes between groups, such as clan, tribe, village, and family on the one hand, and mass units on the other hand, such as city, office, or factory. Mass units, which seem to be ever-increasing in scope and numbers, as in our current emphasis on globalization, intensify the process of alienation from the unconscious. As Neumann sees it, about the only kind of original group left is the family, but even it seems more and more confined to childhood, or even infancy, as mass units like schools take over early.

Essentially, Jungians like Neumann are calling for the restoration of

the community of limited size, which supports the family, which in turn supports the positive development of the individual. Such a community would maintain permanent spiritual and creative connections to ancestors and to other species. Imagine a poetry that would evoke all of these communities in the same imagery, as seen from a porch above the Clearwater River in Idaho:

QUIET NIGHT

The bat's open thorax blips
—that's its heart
beating, says the boy—and its mouth bites
at the air, and the cat
that brought it down sits two steps below
and preens, while the pale cone
shed by the porch light makes and remakes itself
with the shadows of miller, moth, and midge.
Listen, the darkness just under the stars
is threaded with passings:
nighthawks and goatsuckers, the sleepy respirations of the
forest,
and the owl that asks first for a name,
then it leaves its spar
and spreads a silence
so vast and immobile
you can hear whole migrations inside it,
the swoons, the plummets, the bland ascensions
of souls.
—Robert Wrigley

In the afterword to our last issue (fall 2005), we wrote of peak oil and the eventual depletion of easily-available fossil fuel that provides the energy that drives the mass structures of civilization. While no one can say what shape future living arrangements may take, one can imagine a smaller scale of community groups, in which the arts will be

inherently more local, more likely place-determined. Food production will occupy more time and attention than many of the activities people now engage in. Reorientation toward the earth will be inevitable. Poetry may assume a new importance, gain an audience beyond its fellow practitioners, and serve to restore the link between the human and the natural worlds. *Windfall* promotes this new poetry as it emerges, open to the ways of living and feeling that embody sustainable life.

VERNAL EQUINOX

Dusk. A muddy path above the river.
Osoberries blooming. Cottonwoods budding.
Pockets of warm air lingering under willows.
Rank odors of algae and fish.

Groundfog settles in the deer-browsed grass.
Sickle moon and the first pale stars.
Spring peepers hush as I approach,
begin singing again when I've passed by.

—Charles Goodrich

Bill Siverly & Michael McDowell

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