

Commuter Places

People develop a complex sense of a place often only after many years (or generations) of staying put in one locale. Yet staying put isn't a matter of gluing the seat of our pants to a bench along Main Street. We are constantly coming and going and constantly revising our mental maps of the routes of our everyday lives. Our "places" are not just the neighborhoods we live in, but also the paths we regularly travel. They deserve the care and attention in poetry that any more lived-in place does, too. It's not just static "places" that we should care about; we also need to pay attention to the distance between places.

The strip malls, the gas stations, and the vacant lots are often the ugliest aspects of America, and we tolerate them because they're "between," as if they're not local to anyone. They often seem generic, dismissible, local versions of national "sacrificed lands." They show up in "road poetry" as emblems of cliché lives and activities. The attitude of the speaking voice is typically anything but sympathetic.

Often we close our eyes to the passing landscape as we travel between important spots. Yet the gradual change of terrain, vegetation, and built environment are important cues for our psychological adjustment to the place we're approaching. It's the distance between that prepares us for change and tunes us to minute details. The experience of Mt. Hood wilderness areas, for instance, is increasingly altered by the commercial and residential growth between Portland and Government Camp, particularly in the once small towns of Damascus, Boring, and Sandy. Or, to jump to a more extreme example, the experience of driving from Knoxville to the country's most visited national park, Great Smoky Mountains, has forever changed with the necessity of running the gauntlet of traffic-clogged commercial tourist attractions for mile after mile before reaching the park.

A good example of how the changing “in-between” landscape induces a change in emotional state is Bette Lynch Husted’s “Driving Home, Rain in the Gorge,” which moves from Portland to Pendleton, mostly along the Columbia and Umatilla rivers. In the opening stanza, the speaker says, “Goodbye again, Starbucks and sushi / hearth fires of poet friends, sunflowers / splashed in paint on asphalt intersections.” Once on the freeway, the speaker recognizes the existence of “Somewhere beyond warehouse and overpass, Big River-- / Nch’i-Wana, the Columbia. Ospreys. Maybe eagles,” even though they’re not seen. After “My tires / hydroplane through liquid sky and reach for purchase, running / gauntlets of urban tanks and drivers holding cell phones,” the speaker reaches the river that marks the western entrance to the Columbia River Gorge and the end of city: “I cross the Sandy, breathe.” From then on, geographic features and the landscape’s inhabitants interact, with the speaker’s attitude apparent in such lines as “Rabbit brush, low / sage. Ditchbank sunflowers? Soon. I lean to scan / the slopes”

We often don’t see in-between places clearly because of our modes of travel and attitudes while traveling. Traveling in an airplane several miles high or on an interstate freeway at seventy miles an hour makes it difficult to see any details. But even on ordinary city streets we’re often pressed for time, juggling coffee or cell phones or CDs while trying to find the shortest, quickest route for appointments and events we’re worried we’ll be late for. Thoughts of our destinations often remove the likelihood we’ll pay attention to the places we’re traveling through. Poets of the “in-between places” do better traveling as passengers than as drivers, and even better as walkers. In “Lexington to 11th to Bidwell,” Melanie Green writes, “The world / is the distance I can walk,” a fit aphorism for such landscape poetry.

Why do we so often remember in minute detail the routes we walked in childhood, to and from school, or the babysitter’s, or friend’s house? The particular crack across a concrete section

of sidewalk, the color and shape of the gravel along a particular fenceline, the house with the doorknob in the center of the front door, the latticework of an old couple's house for some reason embed themselves in our memories. Is it because we were young and impressionable? Is it because most of us walked neighborhood streets a lot more as children than as adults? As poets, often our most difficult task is to create a state of intense awareness and wonder. The gradual but continuous changes of a walking route are one way to re-enter an intense state of impressionability.

Indigenous poetry from various parts of the world show us ways for poetry to address the in-between places. In "Good, Wild, Sacred," Gary Snyder tells the story of traveling in Australia on a dirt road from Alice Springs in the bed of a pickup truck with a Pintube elder who rapidly told one story after another. "He was talking about a mountain over there," Snyder says, "telling me a story about some wallabies that came to that mountain in the dreamtime and got into some kind of mischief with some lizard girls. He had hardly finished that and he started in on another story about another hill over here and another story over there." It dawns on Snyder that the stories were meant to be told while walking through the same territory. Rather than skipping stories, the elder gave speeded-up versions of the usual cycle. We are left with the understanding that every place has stories, "full of lore and song, and also practical information" (82).

In *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin gives a sense of the fullness of stories throughout Australia: "There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung. One should perhaps visualize the Songlines as a spaghetti of Iliads and Odysseys, writhing this way and that, in which every 'episode' was readable in terms of geology" (13). Perhaps after having lived in the Northwest for five or ten thousand years, we might have such a "storied" landscape. Certainly, writing about a place in "the best words in the best order"—poetry—is a step toward valuing place.

It may sound as though “commuter poetry” or a poetry of the in-between places would be road poetry, poetry of travel, and there may be similarities. But the focus for road poetry is typically on the people experiencing the trip, with the places passed through more often a secondary concern and given incidental or superficial treatment. What we’re suggesting is a poetry which pays greater attention to the in-between places and which looks for their own stories rather than imposing expectations or experiences from those passing through.

Elizabeth Bishop’s “Filling Station,” for instance, marvels at detail after detail, drawing conclusions here and there:

Oh, but it is dirty!
—this little filling station,
oil-soaked, oil-permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
black translucency.

Be careful with that match!

We learn little about the speaker of the poem, who seems more interested in understanding the filling station than in using it for her own concerns. So instead of quick understandings, we get a number of questions:

Do they live in the station?

.....

Why the extraneous plant?

Why the taboret?

Why, oh why, the doily?

We get no answers to most of the questions, but we do get an intense look at the station, enough to draw some conclusions about the people who run it. By the end of the poem we know that we have experienced a particular place—and, in retrospect, it’s just the sort of place that most travelers would have seen only hurriedly, superficially.

To let such a place speak may require research of various kinds, pushing poetry well beyond self-centered analyses of the poet’s

emotional state and into the realms of activity more common to creative nonfiction. It may mean talking with people who live or work in the in-between places, listening without judging. It may mean using a library or the Internet to find the meanings of local terms and the history of the place.

Perhaps what's most different in writing about the in-between places is the necessity of adopting an attitude which is alien to much me-centered and ego-driven mainstream poetry. That's an attitude of humility, an acknowledgement that we see only the surface, and a recognition that the place and its history and its meanings are complex. It's a natural tendency as outsiders, particularly if we consider ourselves well-informed or well-traveled, to want to say to local residents, "You mustn't do this, it's ruined other places." With a more humble, more tentative attitude, it's easier to continue to pose questions, which helps continue the giving of attention.

The questions to be asked depend upon the in-between place. Some to start with: How is it changing? What might the changes mean? Are the changes for the better? What do the changes do to the place? Are the changes destructive of what is alive in the place? What's the connection between the changes and the history of the place? Who are the people involved and what are their stories about the place?

Richard Hugo's most anthologized "town" poem, "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," demonstrates the tension a poem can achieve when in-depth knowledge of a place is balanced against a bewilderment or curiosity about the place:

You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
you had was years ago. You walk these streets
laid out by the insane, past hotels
that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.

.....

The principal supporting business now
is rage. Hatred of the various grays
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls
who leave each year for Butte. One good
restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out.
The 1907 boom, eight going silver mines
a dance floor built on springs—

The emphasis in Hugo's poem is on the place and the people in the place, not on the speaker—yet the speaker is definitely in the poem, providing a frame through which we see the town ("Say your life broke down" at the opening, and at near the closing, "The car that brought you here still runs").

Too often, poetry presents a static view of a place from a fixed position. Indeed, many poets think of lyric poetry as a capturing of a moment in time, as opposed to narrative's capturing of a sequence of moments. Poems quickly become more substantial with a progression of settings, responses, associations, and metaphors to convey them following a route. For a repeatedly traveled route, a poem quickly becomes more complex as the different realities of different times become superimposed.

Paying attention to the commuter landscapes or in-between landscapes is one more aspect of our obligation to the land—not just the land we live on, or the land that provides us our food, but the land that takes us here and there. Writing about such in-between places humanizes the landscape and connects us to lives and concerns beyond our own. It plants the landscape into our memories, making landscape carry the narrative of our lives.

Bill Siverly

Michael McDowell

Works referred to in this afterword

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Contributors' Notes

Eleanor Berry lives in Lyons, Oregon. Her most recent book, *Green November*, was published by Traprock Books in 2006.

D. H. Bleything lives in Portland, Oregon. His most recent book, *Perfect Mistakes*, was published by Traprock Books in 2006.

Sharon Bronzan lives in Portland, Oregon. Her work is showing at the Augen Gallery, 817 S.W. 2nd Avenue, Portland, Oregon, October 28 through November 28, 2006.

David Campiche lives in Seaview, Washington. His most recent book, *Sometime Around Midnight*, was published by Anabasis Chapbooks in 2000.

Celia Carlson lives in Gresham, Oregon.

Barbara Drake lives in Yamhill, Oregon. Her most recent book, *Small Favors*, was published by Traprock Books in 2003.

Maralee Gerke lives in Madras, Oregon. Her most recent book, *Like Pearls on My Tongue*, was published by Pumpkin Seed Press in 2006.

Charles Goodrich lives in Corvallis, Oregon. His most recent book, *The Practice of Home*, was published by Lyons Press in 2004.

Melanie Green lives in Portland, Oregon. Her most recent book, *Determining Sky*, was published by Press-22 in 2005.

David Johnson died in Portland, Oregon, this past February. His most recent book, *Pitching My Tent on Slanted Ground*, was published by Walking Bird Press in 2005.

Marilyn Johnston lives in the village of Macleay, east of Salem, Oregon. Her most recent book, *Red Dust Rising*, was published by the Habit of Rainy Nights Press in 2004.

Shelley Kirk-Rudeen lives in Olympia, Washington.