

POEMS OF PLACE

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Place has been on my mind lately. This past summer with two of my children I went to Calabria in the south of Italy to find the village my grandfather left early in this century. Serrastretta is a lovely and lonely town high in cloud-clothed mountains. We found peasant women, dressed in their traditional black costumes, drawing water from the well, and old men playing cards in the square before the ancient church -- everyone's eyes flashing that natural suspicion of the strangers who had come a great way merely to see them. We also found juke boxes containing contemporary American rock music, and even video games. Amid the contradictions of this beauty, only some of it unchanged from feudal times-- the accents of the folk, the neat terraces of their gardens and olive groves -- we found a place where more than anywhere else on earth we belonged; yet at the same time, a place where we did not. Place remains for me a series of contrasts: the states of mind over matter, and the matter not even mind can change.

I do not for a moment believe that there exists an identifiable "Western Reserve poem" or "Cleveland poem" or "Ohio poem" that speaks a unique language; I do feel, however, that poets are uniquely qualified to portray a sense of their place, to fashion from river and field, high-rise and vacant lot the stuff of symbol and myth -- something as *real* as geography. A poem arising out of Ohio, or the Western Reserve, carefully conceived, can be like nothing else. It *means*, I am convinced, to live or to have spent time in some place. In the final analysis, we are *where we are*.

You might expect Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey or Mount Snowden, the New Englands of Robinson, Frost and Mary Oliver, James Wright's seedy Ohio River neighborhoods, Richard Hugo's ghostly Montana towns, the Mannahatta of Whitman and the Paterson of W. C. Williams to be places so limiting -- delineated as they are by exact degrees of longitude and latitude -- as to curtail severely the effects of the poetry such poets make of such places. But we are in so many ways creatures of sense that just the opposite takes place in the poem that employs the natural power of the sense of place. Such locales can animate and be animated by their poems so greatly that each particular becomes the universal, each specific the mythic, each place the only place.

In the successful place poem the poet takes to heart the lay of the land, photographs with the eye and sketches with the hand each landmark, breathes the air and tastes the water, places his or her ear to the ground and listens.

Of course, place can be here *and* there. Thirteen years ago, as a student, I left this country for the first time and went to Ireland. I walked the O'Connell Street of Leopold Bloom's Dublin and felt closer to the Euclid Avenue of my native Cleveland; scaled the heights of Yeats' Knocknerea and Ben Bulbin and understood better the hills around Bellefontaine and Athens; slogged over the peat bogs of Seamus Heaney and thought of flowering beanfields around Medina and Marion. I still bear on my tongue the sweetness of the cream, the rank perfume of burning turf and tepid stout. The same words, but changed utterly. If I had three lifetimes to write through I could never get it all down. Such going to other places makes poets of us all. Returning home, like Whitman from New Orleans, we find we have found our tongues.

To the ancients each rivulet, grove and tor was divine, or at least magic. Pliny writes of a spring sacred to Apollo. Each taste of its waters inspired priests to prophecy but shortened their lives. Diodorus of Sicily speaks of a lake not far from my own Erie: "Whoever has drunk of it falls into a frenzy and accuses himself of every sin committed in secret." Even the Hebrew god lived on a particular mountain, and his people were promised *land*. The good poem of place

employs the natural energy of *somewhere*, generating power as blades collect the force of rushing wind or falling water.

Place can be both haunting and haunted. Where is the location on this earth where no one has been, no one was conceived, born; where no one loved, hated, died? Nearly every inch or acre must reverberate with the beating of hearts and lungs of the living and the no longer living. The dead have named almost every place we can visit or inhabit. What they have left we can sense. Place poems enable us to be in two places at once, to live forever, to leave whenever we wish this confining tent of bone and flesh.

I can think of few poets who do not make use, at least on occasion, of such energy. Even T. S. Eliot, as cerebral as he can be, takes us to real mean streets that stink of gritty, yellow smoke and to Little Giddings that run like no other streams.

So often the poem that lasts is the poem planted in familiar soil; the compass that points us home; the dowsing rod that, twitching, says *here* there is something good and true. Such poems are maps. Without them we could never find our way.

Abstractions, so attractive to young poets, are *nowhere*. It is too easy to build without taking care to survey, lay the foundations, dig the well; without putting down footers, hanging the plumb line in a steady hand. But such poems seldom last. They can be blown down in the next variable wind of fashion or taste. Our senses crave phrases and lines that reconstruct remembered neighborhoods plank by plank, brick by brick; that plot each creek and alleyway, mountain and molehill; that sound and look like and have the feel of home. I remember reading somewhere that the Druids took the names of trees and stones most familiar to them and made them letters of the alphabet. So should we.

The places in these poems we can visit time and time again; such poems are far more accessible than those that are merely voices, confessions and ideas, or poems about poems about poems.

Where? we feel the human need to ask. Nowhere but *here*, poems of place respond. *There*. And therefore, *everywhere*.

[Portions of this essay appeared previously, in different form, in the introduction to *Poetry Ohio, Art of the State: An Anthology of Ohio Poems* (a Special Issue of *Cornfield Review*, Marion, Ohio, 1984).]

DRIVING NORTH; OR, THE DEPRESSION THAT ATE CLEVELAND

Ohio 71. My life rewinds. Toward me
beyond the median's riot of weeds,
shattered treads from big-rigs
and glistening brown and green shards
from bottles of Stroh's and Wild Irish Rose,
the highway teems with desperate tribes
migrating to the Sunbelt. A convoy
of pickups and fuming Caddies
loaded low to the pot-holed road,
Greyhounds, Harleys, campers, Fords
bearing cargoes of generations.
I think of all those 50's films
in which the citizens had no choice
but to stampede out of their lives
and hightail it to the countryside
pursued by saucer, robot, spider, thing,
It, What, Them. Those fleeing today
ride dreams of acidless rain, time-clocks
that tick and chime without stop.
I enter the city, and the flow toward me
disappears. Like being somewhere wrong
as a child, some neighborhood haunt
where law or lore implores No Trespass,
realizing too late my friends
have gone back, I'm alone utterly.
I pass the cathedral quiet of obsolescence,
G.M. and the tank plant, dark mills
of Jones & Laughlin and U.S. Steel
sitting forlorn as widows at Sunday Mass,
horizons cluttered with steeples and stacks
that one stood for all there was,
the neighborhood's every rite,
paychecks, union dues, paradise, hell.
Leaving the car, I walk toward Lake Erie,
bitter brew of detergents and fertilizers,
tumored crappies, sheepshead, tar-dark carp.
Is there no one going my way? I look up
at the skyline. Something beastly
lurches toward me, roaring out fire,
gloating eyes surveying these perfect ruins
and turning slowly to fix on me.

CUYAHOGA CRUISE: RIDING THE *GOODTIME*

Anywhere we feel the human need
to be, there's a river can take us.
Old servants, knees
creaking, the bridges bow and rise
to usher us into the underworld,
land of ancestors. All's new
as the earliest memory.
The boat's throaty horn
resounds from each shore
like a bad dream from both sides
of the brain. In the days
when it seemed the whole world
was working, the river
flowed slowly, thick and volatile
enough to burn its bridges
behind it, sky above ominous
with the bonfires of industry.
Now the water paints
two weedy banks a tepid hue,
trickles thin as cheap wine,
carp mortal as any city
winnowing beneath our feet.
Time's the worst of plagues,
both Moses and Pharoah knew.
Hulett unloaders stand
motionless, grasshoppers
caught in early frost
near mills whose fires
were blown out by winds
prevailing from Brazil and Japan.
The Central Viaduct, the way
for thousands of horses and laborers
to move from old worlds
of Europe's east and west
to the new, stops in mid-air
these days, gray as old photos
in forgotten books. Refineries
float by, busied with no tankers.
The ghost of Rockefeller
haunts depots that lead nowhere,
giving out shiny dimes
to ancient children.
We pass only one ore carrier,
tugless and guided upriver
by bow-thrusters, a self-unloader,
its skeleton crew trying
to look lively. Seeing
this nothing, we see all,
river's bends coiling *then*
upon the *now*. Yet here
are spaces made holy

by aching ages of hard labor,
men and women sentenced only
to work, work, work.
In the Flats all things went
up and down, back and forth
to order creation's chaos,
pellets of taconite ore mined
in Minnesota's numbing north,
heartbreaking chunks
of Pennsylvania coal, great lakes
of petroleum, blood and sweat.
In this land the crooked
was made straight,
the unrefined and crude
ground smooth by heroes
who spent hearts, livers, lungs
on life. In the breezes
that play through abandoned rooms
and unoccupied docks,
if we listen as never before
we hear the voices
of our parents, recall what
they stood for, the million acts
of work and love that brought us here
just so we can make this voyage,
the gift of remembering,
our future and our destination.

SEPTEMBER

As we move together
with the harvest moon
through these shattered Ohio fields
where only days before bean and corn
fountained and shivered
through endless afternoons,
at that place where our bodies
cease to be our own
two thin shadows
rise, precisely
our image and likeness
and at the same time
not at all,
ready to drift off alone
the moment we've gone
a step too far.

This instant's our equinox.
We're halfway home.

THESE TREES

for Mary

The cold that shimmers
from these trees
and all we've learned to want
in a life as full of wishing
as our own
are one this evening.

What's loving after all,
if not a place so far from fire
that walking there
quickens the pulse walking back
will slow, breath a fog
between us and each sunset?

With branches fruitless
but for frost fashioned
of cold and thaw and cold,
no fragrance but what's carried
on the winds between us,
we know there will be

no goodness anywhere else,
and the spaces our bodies take
we can make lovely
with a kind of truth
passing each to each,
sight, touch, words, breath.

We must leave now, or stay
a moment too long.
Already we've grown
so close to dark that someone
farther on, pausing
to spend some time

admiring these trees,
as close to eternal as anything
in this bordered life
of regions and paths,
might see us here
and think we're one.