The Poetry of Place

“If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are,”
—Wendell Berry

What are we talking about when we talk about place?
Why write about place?

Negative capability, Keats has it, is "...when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact." Negative capability also involves, as Eliot says, "a continual extinction of personality," which is the other half of Wendell Berry’s truth, the half that completes the explanation of why a poet would choose to write a poetry of place.

So the poet of place situates himself in place in order to lose himself/herself in it. Poetry of place is actually a poetry of displacement and self-annihilation. The poet replaces self with situation, turning the self, as in were, inside out, so that the center of “knowing who you are” becomes the circumference of uncertainty.

—Sandra Beasley

So what are we talking about... Place?
1. A Physical Space in Nature

Theodore Roethke
The Rose

There are those to whom place is unimportant,
But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,
Is important—
Where the hawks sway out into the wind,
Without a single wingbeat,
And the eagles sail low over the fir trees,

I sway outside myself
Into the darkening currents,
Into the small spillage of driftwood,
The waters swirling past the tiny headlands.
Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment
While on a far point of the rocks
The light heightened,
And below, in a mist out of nowhere,
The first rain gathered?
Roethke

Theodore Roethke changed the mental landscape of the Northwest by showing many new poets how to write carefully, as he did, ways to use scenery and weather as inroads to the imagination.

—The Northwest Guide

“There is nothing more disconcerting than when a rich nature thins into despair. The poet’s capacity to face up to genuine mystery, (erases the despair).”
2. A Structure or Room

The Writer

In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,
My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys
Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,
As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
A stillness greatens, in which
The whole house seems to be thinking,
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;
How we stole in, lifted a sash

And retreated, not to affright it;
And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
We watched the sleek, wild, dark

And iridescent creature
Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody,
For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
Rose when, suddenly sure,
It lifted off from a chair-back,
Beating a smooth course for the right window
And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.

Richard Wilber
Richard Wilber

“I feel that the universe is full of glorious energy,” he explained in an interview with Peter Stitt in the Paris Review, “that the energy tends to take pattern and shape, and that the ultimate character of things is comely and good.”
The Lord gives everything and charges by taking it back. What a bargain. Like being young for a while. We are allowed to visit hearts of women, to go into their bodies so we feel no longer alone. We are permitted
romantic love with its bounty and half-life of two years. It is right to mourn for the small hotels of Paris that used to be when we used to be. My mansard looking down on Notre Dame every morning is gone, and me listening to the bell at night. Venice is no more. The best Greek Islands have drowned in acceleration. But it’s the having not the keeping that is the treasure. Ginsberg came to my house one afternoon and said he was giving up poetry because it told lies, that language distorts. I agreed, but asked what we have that gets it right even that much. We look up at the stars and they are not there. We see the memory of when they were, once upon a time. And that too is more than enough.

—Jack Gilbert
Selling the House

This room—pale yellow walls—where my husband once delivered a love note by tucking it beneath her collar, then asking me to call the dog.

That corner in the living room where I read every morning in the dark for an hour and a half one winter until I finished War and Peace. The morning I finished it. I looked up from “Tolstoy’s last metaphor to see it was already light outside and nothing would ever be the same. The nick in the back door I made when I kicked it. The lawn we killed and grew halfway again. And the stories Deborah across the street told about the man who lived here before us,

who’d been a prisoner of war and had been so careful about the lawn, going out mornings with a pair of kitchen scissors to trim along the curb. The light in the windows, the toilet’s stupid grin, the worst fights and the best. It is a small price. This could be yours.
Newly appointed Poet Laureate of Texas, Host of “This is Just to Say,” on KUT in Austin. Winner of the National Poetry Competition and published by Penguin Press.
3. The Rituals of the Day

What I Am

Fred Sanford & I’m standing in the express lane (cash only) about to buy Head & Shoulders, the white people shampoo, no one knows what I am. My name could be Lamont.

George Clinton wears colors like Toucan Sam, the Froot Loop pelican. Follow your nose, he says. So you tell me what’s good, what’s god, what’s funky. When I stop
by McDonalds for a cheeseburger, no one suspects what I am. I smile at Ronald’s poster, perpetual grin behind the pissed-off, fly-girl cashier I love. Where are my goddamn fries? Ain’t I American? I never say, Niggaz in my poems. My ancestors didn’t emigrate. Why would anyone leave their native land? I’m thinking about shooting some hoop later on. I’ll dunk on everyone of those niggaz. They have no idea what I am. I might be the next Jordan god. They don’t know if Toni Morrison is a woman or a man. Michael Jackson is the biggest name in showbiz. Mamma se Mamma sa mamma ku sa, sang the Bushmen in Africa. I’ll buy a dimebag after the game,
me & Jody. He says, Fuck them white people at work, Man. He was an All-American in high school. He’s cool, but he don’t know what I am, & so what. Fred Sanford’s on in a few & I got the dandruff-free head & shoulders of white people & a cheeseburger belly & a Thriller CD & Nike high tops & slavery’s dead & the TV’s my daddy--

You big Dummy!
Fred tells Lamont.

Terrance Hayes
April 9

I woke up not in Paris
that’s the first thing that went wrong
after the pleasure of a week
of speaking French badly
also the smoke detector went off
when I made coffee,
and my telephone lacks a dial tone
so I know I’m back in the greatest city
with my incomparable view of garbage
in the alley out my window with sun
a bright white on red brick turning yellow
and just enough blue to imply a sky
high enough and far enough away
to stand for all that’s mind (mine)

“I think that in my own writing, the
idea of a place—its name, its
particular culture, the language that’s
spoken there, the dialect—seems to
me to be part of a reality that I must
like.”

David Lehman
Homo sapiens is the only species to suffer psychological exile.
—E. O. Wilson

I returned to a stand of pines,
   bone-thin phalanx

flanking the roadside, tangle
   of understory—a dialectic of dark

and light—and magnolias blossoming
   like afterthought: each flower

a surrender, white flags draped
   among the branches. I returned

to land’s end, the swath of coast
   clear cut and buried in sand:
mangrove, live oak, gulfweed
razed and replaced by thin palms—

palmettos—symbols of victory
or defiance, over and over

marking this vanquished land. I returned
to a field of cotton, hallowed ground—

as slave legend goes—each boll
holding the ghosts of generations:

those who measured their days
by the heft of sacks and lengths

of rows, whose sweat flecked the cotton plants
still sewn into our clothes.

I returned to a country battlefield
where colored troops fought and died—

Port Hudson where their bodies swelled
and blackened beneath the sun—unburied
until earth’s green sheet pulled over them,
unmarked by any headstones.

Where the roads, buildings, and monuments
are named to honor the Confederacy,

where that old flag still hangs, I return
to Mississippi, state that made a crime

of me—mulatto, half-breed—native
in my native land, this place they’ll bury me.

“If you’re born in a place like that (Mississippi), with its landscape and
that history, because it’s so troubled, it fuels you, trying to grapple with that
beautiful and troubled history.”

Natasha Trethewey
6. The Place Beyond the Place

A Morning

I have carried it with me each day: that morning I took my uncle’s boat from the brown water cove and headed for Mosher Island. Small waves splashed against the hull and the hollow creak of oarlock and oar rose into the woods of black pine crusted with lichen. I moved like a dark star, drifting over the drowned other half of the world until, by a distant prompting, I looked over the gunwale and saw beneath the surface a luminous room, a light-filled grave, saw for the first time the one clear place given to us when we are alone.
“If a poem is set in a particular place, the particular place is erased by the imaginary place that is suggested by the poem.”

“The poem takes the place of the actual world. The poem is the experience of the experience of being in the actual world.”

Mark Strand
The Poetry of Place

1. A Physical Place in Nature
2. A Structure or a Room
3. Rituals of the Day
4. A Culture
5. A Memory
6. A Place Beyond the Place
Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind, that is not mine, but is a made place, that is mine, it is so near to the heart, an eternal pasture folded in all thought so that there is a hall therein that is a made place, created by light wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall. Wherefrom fall all architectures I am I say are likenesses of the First Beloved whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.

She it is Queen Under The Hill whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words that is a field folded.
It is only a dream of the grass blowing east against the source of the sun in an hour before the sun’s going down whose secret we see in a children’s game of ring a round of roses told.

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow as if it were a given property of the mind that certain bounds hold against chaos, that is a place of first permission, everlasting omen of what is.

“Shadow and chaos are bounded by the poet’s expansive imagination, over which he’s not the controlling agent; rather, he is its obedient servant, permitted from time to time to enter into and elucidate its mysteries.”
—Peter O’Leary
Robert Duncan

Robert Duncan was described by Kenneth Rexroth as “one of the most accomplished, one of the most influential” of the postwar American poets. Duncan was an important part of both the Black Mountain school of poetry led by Charles Olson, and the San Francisco Renaissance.

Duncan’s idiosyncratic poetics drew on myth, occultism, religion—including the theosophical tradition in which he was raised—and innovative writing practices such as projective verse and composition by field.
Some Terms

Theosophy

An esoteric religious movement established by Helena Blavatsky that draws its belief that there is an ancient secretive brotherhood of spiritual adepts centered in Tibet. The masters of this tradition are believed to have cultivated great wisdom and almost supernatural powers. This religion is believed to eventually eclipse the modern versions.

Projective Verse

To compose (Ezra Pound) in the sequence of a musical phrase, not in that of a metronome.

Composition by Field

Opposes the traditional method of poetic composition based on received form and measure. To rely on the transfer of poetic energy from source to poem to reader in the way that energy naturally shifts, not in a pre-prescribed structure.
Taking a Little Trip
“August on Sourdough, A Visit from Dick Brewer”

Gary Snyder from The Back Country

You hitched a thousand miles north from San Francisco
Hiked up the mountainside a mile in the air
The little cabin—one room—walled in glass
Meadows and snowfields, hundreds of peaks.
We lay in our sleeping bags talking half the night;
Wind in the guy-cables summer mountain rain....
Next morning I went with you
   as far as the cliffs,
Loaned you my poncho— the rain across the shale—
You down the snowfield
   flapping in the wind
Waving a last goodbye half hidden in the clouds
To go on hitching
   clear to New York;
Me back to my mountain and far, far, west.

Perhaps best known as a poet he is also a lecturer, essayist, and environmental activist. He has been described as the “Poet Laureate of Deep Ecology.” He is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award.
“August on Sourdough, A Visit from Dick Brewer”

*Gary Snyder from The Back Country*

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   north from San Francisco
Hiked up the mountainside a mile in the air
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To Notice:

1. Carefully made, casual, tender.
2. Requires modern tastes
3. Rhythm and Space
   1-2-123
4. Echoes the poetic tradition of leave-taking
   
   You go,
   I stay;
   two autumns
   —Buson

   Seeing people off,
   Being seen off,—
   autumn in Kiso
   —Basho
Linda Gregg
Death Looks Down

Death looks down on the salmon. A male and female in two pools, one above the other. The female turns back along the path of water to the male, does not touch him, and returns to the place she had been.

I know what Death will do. Their bodies already sour and ragged. Blood has risen to the surface under the scales. One side of his jaw is unhinged. Death will pick them up. Put them away under his coat against his skin and belt them there. Will walk away up to the path through the bay trees. Through the dry grass of California to where the mountain begins. Where a few deer almost the color of the hills will look up until he is under the trees again and the road ends and there is a gate. He will climb over that with his treasure. It will be dark by then.
But for now, he does nothing. He does not disturb the silence at all. Nor the occasional sound of leaves, of ferns touching, of grass or stream. For now he looks down at the salmon large and whole motionless days and nights in the cold water. Lying still, always facing the constant motion.

Linda Gregg was born in NY and raised in Marin County. Studied at SF State. Her poetry is admired for its ability to discuss grief, desire, and longing with electrifying craftsmanship and poise. She spent several years living with Jack Gilbert living on the Greek Islands of Paros and Santorini.
The Apple Trees at Olema

They are walking in the woods along the coast and in a grassy meadow, wasting, they come upon two old neglected apple trees. Moss thickened every bough and the wood of the limbs looked rotten but the trees were wild with blossom and a green fire of small new leaves flickered even on the deadest branches. 
Blue-eyes, poppies, a scattering of lupine flecked the meadow, and an intricate, leopard-spotted leaf-green flower whose name they didn't know. Trout lily, he said; she said, adder's-tongue. She is shaken by the raw, white, backlit flaring of the apple blossoms. He is exultant, as if some thing he felt were verified, and looks to her to mirror his response.
If it is afternoon, a thin moon of my own dismay fades like a scar in the sky to the east of them. He could be knocking wildly at a closed door in a dream. She thinks, meanwhile, that moss resembles seaweed drying lightly on a dock.
Torn flesh, it was the repetitive torn flesh
of appetite in the cold white blossoms
that had startled her. Now they seem tender
and where she was repelled she takes the measure
of the trees and lets them in. But he no longer
has the apple trees. This is as sad or happy
as the tide, going out or coming in, at sunset.
The light catching in the spray that spumes up
on the reef is the color of the lesser finch
they notice now flashing dull gold in the light
above the field. They admire the bird together,
it draws them closer, and they start to walk again.
A small boy wanders corridors of a hotel that way.
Behind one door, a maid. Behind another one, a man
in striped pajamas shaving. He holds the number
of his room close to the center of his mind
gravely and delicately, as if it were the key,
and then he wanders among strangers all he wants.
Robert Hass served as United States Poet Laureate from 1995 to 1997. He won the 2007 National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Time and Materials. In 2014 he was awarded the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets.

Imagination runs through the places where we live like water. We need both things—a living knowledge of the land and a live imagination of it and our place in it—if we are going to preserve it.

Robert Hass
Brenda Hillman
Practical Water

What does it mean to live a moral life

It is nearly impossible to think about this

We went down to the creek
The sides were filled
   with tiny watery activities

The mind was split & mended
Each perception divided into more

& there were in the hearts of the water molecules
   little branches perpendicular to thought

Had lobbied Congress but it was dead
Had written to the Committee on Understanding
Had written to the middle
   middle of the middle
   class but it was drinking
Had voted in cafes with shoplifters & beekeepers stirring tea made of water hitched to the green arc

An ethics occurs at the edge of what we know

The creek goes underground about here

The spirits offer us a world of origins
Owl takes its call from the drawer of the sky

Unusually warm global warming day out

A tiny droplet shines on a leaf & there your creek is found

It has borrowed something to link itself to others

We carry ourselves through the days in code DNA like Raskolnikov’s staircase neither good nor bad in itself

Lower frequencies are the mind
What happened to the creek is what happened to the sentence in the twentieth century
It got social underground

You should make yourself uncomfortable If not you who

Thrush comes out from the cottony coyote bush glink-a-glink
chunk drink
trrrrrr
turns a golden eyebrow to the ground

We run past the plant that smells like taco sauce

Recite words for water weeter water see.tar vatr>want vod
[insert all languages here]
Poor Rimbaud didn’t know how to live
but he knew how to act
Red-legged frog in the pond sounds like him

Uncomfortable & say a spell:
blossom knit & heel affix
fiddle fern in the neck of the sun

It’s hard to be water
to fall from faucets with fangs
to lie under trawlers as horizons
but you must

Your species can’t say it
You have to do spells & tag them

Uncomfortable & act like you mean it

Go to the world
Where is it
Go there
A thought or two. . . .

“Practical Water” doubles (both as a poem and) as an ecological treatise, in which the imagination holds a wellspring of alternatives to our society’s environmentally damaging practices.

(Its) great appeal is in Hillman’s ability to find social significance in the smallest of natural phenomena.

At its best when tangible details serve as loci for more ethereal ideas about one’s relationship to one’s surroundings.

Hillman uses the image of a creek to suggest similarities between its “tiny watery activities” and the neurological process of perceiving them.

—Kristina Marie Darling

Practical water has points to make. “What does it mean to live a moral life,” Hillman asks, sounding the central preoccupation. She answers it most often by portraying what is not moral: greed, male egocentrism, the use of language as propaganda.

—Boston Review
Grand Canyon

You have come to the edge in your t-shirt and tennis shoes, the trail map snapping in the sudden wind, and there,

like nothing you had imagined, nothing in the pocket-sized postcards or the traveler’s guides,

is the split continent, enormous and jagged, a terrible incision, terribly gorgeous,

the late-afternoon air pouring in like liquid spilled from far fissures or glacial thaw.

Below, invisible, is the green wiry river rubbing against rock, pursuing its prehistoric task.

You’d not expected such a vast accident, your shock the same as seeing a live heart
beating, or the blood of a baby’s birth. 
Soon you’ll descend, shouldering a pack 

down switchback trails into the open wound, 
where, at dawn, you crawl from your nylon tent 

to watch the sun, that rusty, iron ball, 
hurl itself over the broken earth.
Richard Shelton:

Local knowledge is to live in a place and know the place, however barren.
Local Knowledge

on December nights
when the rain we needed months ago
is still far off and the wind
gropes through the desert
in search of any tree to hold it

those who live here all year round
listen to the irresistible
voice of loneliness
and want only to be left alone

local knowledge is to live in a place
and know the place
however barren

some kinds of damage
provide their own defense
and we who stay in the ruins
are secure against enemies and friends

if you should see one of us
in the distance as your caravan passes
and if he is ragged and gesturing
do not be mistaken

he is not gesturing for rescue
he is shouting *go away*
Wilber Moving from Things of the World into the Spiritual

Love Calls Us to the Things of This World

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple
As false dawn.

Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.
Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.
Now they are rising together in calm swells
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet
That nobody seems to be there.

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,
From the punctual rape of every blessèd day,
And cries,

“Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.”
Yet, as the sun acknowledges
With a warm look the world’s hunks and colors,
The soul descends once more in bitter love
To accept the waking body, saying now
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,

“Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;
Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating
Of dark habits,
keeping their difficult balance.”
This and That

Physical space and spiritual grace have long been connected in poetry—the insistent particularity and resonance of the physical world (is) the point of reference by which poets are able to join us to their poetic paths. The poetry of American solace is the poetry of place.

David St. John

Place uses me.
Donald Revell

Place reenacts our past,
David St. John

The greatest poem ever written is that stretch of highway on the way to a town you’ve never heard of before.

T. Pfefferle

It is in the space between inner and outer worlds, which is also the space between people—the transitional space—that intimate relationships and creativity occur.

D. W. Winnicott
Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,  
Asleep on the black trunk,  
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.  
Down the ravine behind the empty house,  
The cowbells follow one another  
Into the distances of the afternoon.  
To my right,  
In a field of sunlight between two pines,  
The droppings of last year's horses  
Blaze up into golden stones.  
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.  
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.  
I have wasted my life.
As Wright began to experiment "he loosened his forms" and "whittled rhetoric to a succession of intense perceptions," Laurence Goldstein explained in the Michigan Quarterly Review. The result was that his speech became more natural and his settings, Marjorie G. Perloff reported in Contemporary Literature, "are dream images rather than actual places." Paul Zweig of the Partisan Review outlined the impact of Wright's later style: "Long before [he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize], Wright had been acknowledged by a generation of poets as the artisan of a new language for poetry: A style of pastoral surrealism, built around strong images and a simple spoken rhetoric. Wright's art lay not in complex grammar, but in a stark structure of perceptions which became their own statement."
Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl’s wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.
Where Now?