Poets On Place

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Introduction

All books start as ideas, but Poets on Place started as a choice to leave one life behind and to go in search of another. My wife and I had great careers. We had worked hard for them, had been busted and broke during our early years, but now I was a writing program administrator, and she was a sales executive for a network-owned TV station. We had worked hard for almost twenty years, and we loved our jobs and the life we led. But we lived in ten different places during that time, and when we both eased into our forties, we started wondering about another move, one not predicated on a job. We thought about taking a look around the country and seeing everything we could.

We had the fantasy of drifting around and starting a business in a pretty little town on the water. A bed and breakfast, maybe. I wanted a place where you could have poetry readings and live music. My wife wanted to make soup (but not salad) and cookies (but not cakes). I thought maybe a Laundromat would be easy to own, but my wife wanted to know who’d fix the dryers. I wanted to open a radio station, play all my favorite songs, and hire college kids for pennies to run it when I wanted to sleep. My wife wanted to know who was going to clean the bathrooms. We kept the fantasies to ourselves. There was always something a little secretive and naughty about our desire to break from the real world.

A move from Texas took us to a suburban community outside Baltimore, Maryland. When house prices began to skyrocket and our neighborhood boomed, the fantasies gained new life. A neighbor sold his three-year-old house for twice what he bought it for, and we began to do calculations in our heads. How much time and space would that money buy us?

We liked where we were; it was a nice bustling suburb, near two big cities (I worked in Baltimore and my wife commuted to D.C.), but it wasn’t really home. We had never found that place. We were visitors wherever we went, never afraid to go on to the next stop. In some ways, home for us was always somewhere else. Home could be anywhere we slept that night. Home, really, was just with each other.

We don’t have kids; our dear fourteen-year-old Boston terrier had recently died, and so we just thought we’d go and see what there was to see. It became a real thing, this fantasy. We could investigate the red and black and “blue highways” of the big country and see if we’d stumble across a place that held a deeper magnetic resonance for us than all the other places we’d lived in in the past.

But we couldn’t just sneak off in the night. We told our families and friends. People told us we were brave. We liked that at first. But after a
while, “brave” started to sound like “stupid.” People said “brave” with their voices lifting at the end, like a question. Like “brave” really meant “Are you both insane?” And we got nervous.

We had sleepless nights. No jobs meant no money. Sure, there’d be money at the beginning; the house sale would solve that problem. But it wasn’t a lot of money. It was a year’s worth, if we kept things simple. If we bought the generic macaroni and cheese. If we did laundry on a rock in a river.

But it still was in our heads, so we started planning. None of it was as romantic as I hoped. I started thinking about mail. Where would our bills go? How would we get health insurance? We started thinking of things we could do with our stuff, and then—like a switch getting thrown—things just moved forward. We quit our jobs. Over the phone, we bought a small investment house near my wife’s folks, and then we gave our furniture and boxes to burly men in a moving van and prayed that they would be willing to take it there.

We bought an RV. A motor home. A Class C. A giant cab-over with a slick interior, a tiny stove, a tiny bathroom, a tiny bed, and giant tanks for gasoline and water. It was a great big rolling tin can, a moving version of our home. In went the smallest version of our stuff that we could imagine. We piled in clothes and cans of soup, paper towels, hoses, wrenches, flashlights. My Swiss Army knife. It was a mini-everything-we-owned; it got only eight miles to the gallon, but it was our ticket to the highway.

Suddenly, twelve months stretched ahead of us like a long, straight line. We wondered what in the world we were going to do for all that time. We knew that the first days would be delicious and long. No work. No clocks. Nobody waiting at school for me or at the office for my wife. We didn’t have deadlines or reports that were due. No students were waiting in a classroom. We imagined the bliss would be overwhelming.

Until the second week. Then what? My wife had longed for more time in the natural world than her career afforded. For years she had stolen the occasional three-day trip to go rafting or camping. She’d come back hungry for more, more trees, more land, but would settle for more reports and more paperwork instead. So the immediate future was intoxicating for her. She shed her old self like it was a coat she had outgrown. She was ready for new places, new experiences, and was going to eat them up no matter how they came to us.

I’m considerably more trouble, however. I have to have something to do. I have to have something to finish. So we talked projects. I’m a writer, a poet, and the thought came to me that I could do something with that. For as long as I’ve written, my own work has been grounded in place, steeped in the sensibility that where we live and work matters. Shortly after we got married, we lived for a dozen years in Texas. I felt
that state’s effect on everything in my work, from the content of a poem to the length of the line. The endless vista of west Texas, the scrubby desert outside Van Horn. I wrote what the wind sounded like. In the places of Texas I found my own voice as a writer. Texas taught me patience. It taught me that what was in between the towns was more important than the towns themselves. And though Texas continued to work on me after I left, the new places added their own colors and textures. So Florida added something, and then Maryland. I wondered about the rush my poetry got from a new place, a new setting, and I thought about how the places of my life were a part of what I wrote, how I wrote.

And I wondered about other poets. How does a poet go from Chicago to Montana, and how is her life different? What happens when a writer from the mountains ends up in a prairie state surrounded by grasslands? How is the art different for someone living on a mountain in Idaho and someone in a 300-square-foot apartment in Greenwich Village?

Poetry is a rich collection of things, people, ideas, language, and places. And it rocketed through my head that the greatest poetry of all, for me, was always somewhere else. The greatest poem ever written is that stretch of highway on the way to a town you’ve never heard of before. The wondrous discovery of every turn.

Each state, another poem. Each town, its own stanza. There was poetry in every bump on the interstate, through every corner of every tiny road. It was all poetry, every place I’d lived. A poetry of places that stretched for endless miles in every direction, under tree-lined streets in Ohio, and under the ominous skies of the Pacific Northwest, and under the perfect blue canopy of the Florida Gulf Coast.

I wanted to know what other writers thought of it. How did their work spring from the places of their lives? And there was only one way to find all of this. We’d have to go to them.
White Sweet Corn
Tomatoes
Nectarine
Lopes
Plums