Poets On Place

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Wherein We Begin Life on the Road

We leave our old home in suburban Baltimore behind at 5:30 a.m., making our way west through the dewy morning. We move carefully through the Maryland panhandle, passing working farms, one time waving at a father and son on a tractor coming the wrong way up the interstate’s shoulder. We cross into West Virginia, and by 8:00 a.m. the sun is up behind us, diffuse, but lighting our way.

Yesterday we watched several men put our furniture and boxes in a large truck. They left late in the day, headed this direction; and every time I come over a hill, I half expect to see the truck in a ditch somewhere, our couch upside down in a creek.

By 9:30 we’re in Morgantown, too early for the interview. We hit Wal-Mart and get a longer water hose and some animal crackers. We pull up at a small park and open all the windows. I drink orange juice and eat a big donut, while my wife looks outside and listens to whatever kind of bird is going to town on the trees there. A woman and a surging black lab go past the front of the motor home, disappearing down a dark wooded trail.
James Harms
Morgantown, West Virginia

Jim Harms couldn’t be a more amiable fellow. He lets me in the front door of his neat, white bungalow. I step over his sneakers on the front porch, but leave mine on. We sit across a small coffee table from each other, and I see he’s a music fan; the Elvis Costello box set gives that away. His laptop rests between us, as if at any moment it might be needed. The warm breeze comes in the open windows, mixing with the downward draft of a single, lazy ceiling fan. Harms wears a T-shirt and shorts, loose white socks. He moves his hands around when he talks, but it’s all relaxed. He tells me about his youth in California and his now decade-long stay in West Virginia.

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Are the places in your poetry based in California, or have you been in West Virginia long enough for it to have taken over?

Most of the places in my poems are the places of childhood, the places of dreams. For some reason, California seems to be the most pervasive landscape in my work: it’s the default landscape.

So when I sit down, it’s less a matter of what’s outside the window, as it is the feeling of locating the calm in this wilderness of constancy, the constancy being memory, the past. I grew up in California. And when I remember the California of my youth, it’s the foothills I see—that particular type of wild grass, the sage, the chaparral. Now that I haven’t lived there in so long, other residue of place is starting to filter in. And it’s only been in the last three years that West Virginia has begun to materialize. And I’m excited by that because it’s such an amazing state for so many reasons—not just its physical beauty, but its unique history. It’s a tragic state in many ways because of the history of exploitation. It was essentially a state owned by people who didn’t live here, and that legacy has been difficult to resolve for many native West Virginians.

In many ways the landscape of West Virginia is caught up in the politics and the social conditions of West Virginia. And that’s how it’s been entering into my poems, very politically. I’m writing a lot about the destruction of landscape, the lack of concern for place, all the time being very conscious of its beauty. So there’s a lot of tension in these newer poems.
I’ve also learned over the years to let the present place, the place where I’m working right now, leak into the poems. If we were talking about issues of time, they’d be anachronistic poems. The past would be contiguous with the present. In my poems, California and wherever I’m sitting at the time sort of meld, sometimes very obviously. There are a lot of disconnects, and instead of trying to massage them out of the poems, I’ve allowed them to remain in all their disruptive glory. To me, poetry is all about simultaneity of time and place. I’m really wanting and encouraging that kind of disconnect, a disconnection that is ultimately rather healing in that the normal rupturing of space and time that feels real—if rather alarming—to the rational mind is mended in the poem.

My book (Freeways and Aqueducts) is ultimately a book about leaving one place and finding another. So the book is organized to foreground that notion. The first section is called “West,” the third section is called “East,” and the middle section is a sequence of poems that acts as a reinvention of the myth of Los Angeles. The collection ends up being about physical and emotional movement: here’s memory, here’s my sense of coming to terms with the past, and here’s an attempt to reconcile myself to the new place.

I knew I had to find a way of coming to terms with a new landscape, a way that wasn’t naive, that wasn’t simply a glorification of that landscape, or a too surface-y consideration of it. And what came to me was the old cliché of “Home is where the heart is.” Family, ultimately, ended up being my way of coming to rest. To say, my home now is with people within a landscape. My kids were born here in West Virginia. I started my family here. So the third section of this new book is very much about the presence of family taking over any other concern with landscape.

Place ended up being connected to my children, to settling down.

But do you still think of yourself as a California poet?

I certainly still do. It’s not something I feel I have to exorcise. Although there is a sense that it’s important to feel at home in the world, so if you’re always feeling displaced that it could work against other factors. One of my teachers, one of my good friends, David Wojahn, always said that it was the condition of twentieth-century American poets to be in exile. Because most of us teach, we tend to move away. We follow jobs, et cetera. That ends up being something about the way the American poem has evolved. And I think that’s right. There is that sense of displacement in American poems. But I feel a lot less anxiety about that displacement now. I really wouldn’t want to live in California again. I love California, and my family and most of my good friends are there. And I visit as regularly as I can. But it no longer seems like an ideal. Because it’s the landscape of childhood, the landscape of dreams, I’ll probably always write about it.
Landscape as the Latest Diet
(Southern California)

Instead of butter, the ten a.m. light of June
   on Little Island, masts blending the mist
      until it clarifies into nothing.

Instead of salt, the sand beneath
   Balboa pier, cool even in July, trimmed
      with wrack and empty cans, the blue haze of spray
         and breeze between the pilings.

Instead of bread, the violet stains
   on the sidewalks of South Pasadena, the jacarandas,
      their small cry tuned to rhyme the sky.

Instead of eggs, the foothills under smog, the sage
   and scrub oak browned by drought
      and the tick of ozone in the air.

Instead of meat, the arroyo at sunrise, the gray
   inside gray of tulle fog and
      coyote, coyote bouncing down
         the deer trail, a pigeon in its mouth.

Instead of sugar, the date palms along
   the dry wash gathering wind
      in their fronds for the hourly reprimand,
         an endless hush.

Instead of wine, the smell of oranges
   and ocean water, the smoke
      of smudge pots before dawn.

Instead of supper, the song of bells
   in the harbor, the seals draped
      over buoys like fat uncles on the furniture.
And everyone at ease in the middle distance, in repose.
And the meal, like memory, a cure
for nothing but hunger, but forgetting.

—James Harms
David Citino
Columbus, Ohio

My wife parks the motor home alongside a large metal fence outside the edge of the Ohio State campus. The campus is ungodly large, yet construction continues to flourish everywhere. We pass work trucks, guys getting out with metal lunch pails, helmets, and other gear, and make our way across to a two-story McDonald’s. The place is fantastic inside, clean, empty. Nobody there but Janet behind the counter. We give our order and then head over to a corner of the room. This feels like a vacation to us, like it’s a school day and we’re playing hooky. We laugh while we eat, wonder if—as is planned—our furniture is arriving in Arkansas this morning.

After we eat, my wife heads back to the motor home, and I sling the big equipment bag of cameras and recorders over my shoulder and start stumbling through campus looking for Denney Hall.

When I find the building, I’m a few minutes early so I sit down on a bench. I notice a first-floor office with lights on. Inside I recognize David Citino. He’s moving around his office, pulling a book off a shelf, going back to his desk.

He’s talking with a colleague when I go inside and knock on his open door, but he waves me in. He has one of those offices every professor wants, full of books, spacious, well lit from inside and out. I’ve played racquetball in smaller spaces.

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In what way has place impacted your own writing?

Well, first of all, I think it’s done so in immeasurable ways. I’ve always been of the belief that every poem happens somewhere. That there is a place, even in that love lyric or that expression from the heart of despair that doesn’t mention Cincinnati, Ohio, or Rome, Italy. That the poet is in a place—his or her head and soul are in places—and that place helps to inform the poet and the poem. Many of my poems are obviously poems in places. They happen in Ohio, or they happen in other places I happen to be, like Italy. And they use the lay of the land. They are very obviously somewhere.

But I think of place as internal as well as external. I’m from Cleveland. I’m living in Columbus. The where I’m from is a template. If I’m in Dublin, or Rome, or Florence, I seem to relate to cities by what I know. That
city I was born and raised in, Cleveland, was gritty and industrial, wonderfully ethnic. It had its neighborhoods of Slovaks and Slovenes and Italians, and black and white—often with their own newspapers, their own grocery stores, bakeries. Cleveland then was divided east and west by a crooked, viscous river that sometimes caught on fire. That’s my city, that internalized place. I tell my students that each of us seems to have some ur-place within—some place we know better than the back of our hand. It might be a neighborhood. It might be those four or five houses where we played as kids. We remember our playmates. We remember what their mothers and dads looked like. We remember the way their houses smelled. It might be a city block. But it’s a magical place, and in our writing we go back there, over and over again. You know the joke that you sometimes hear is “Every poet just has one poem. He or she just writes it over and over again.” I think that in some real sense, every poet has one place. And he or she is able to go there or to see new places always in terms of that original one.

*I know you’ve lived here all of your life, but do you feel like an Ohio poet?*

There’s no doubt about that. I’ve been here for fifty-six years. Ohio poet is what I am. And I’m very proud of it. Having been here so long, I know the place. I know Ohio, the magazines and the poets, in addition to the towns, valleys, lakes, and rivers. The idea of being an Ohio poet might be to some very limiting. “You’re an Ohio poet? But what about America, the world?” But I believe that so many poets draw strength from that place, from their roots. Think of Faulkner, who is so popular in Japan. Think of Hemingway and those early Hemingway stories from up in Michigan, still read in Russia. There is something about paying attention to one’s specific place that enables us to touch the universal.

*You talked earlier about traveling. What happens in your poetry when you travel?*

So many writers are energized by dislocation. Especially those that are so ensconced in one place. You think of what exile did for James Joyce. He, in *Ulysses*, recreates this city that he knew. But he was elsewhere, in other cities in Europe, to do that. I’ve been electrified by travel. I start writing like a maniac, and I still can work on poems that started twenty to twenty-five years ago somewhere else; but you bring
them home, bring them back to your place, and you begin to see them better, see better what you’re trying to do and say.

Because of my ethnic background, traveling to Italy is going back to my roots at the same time. So it’s someplace that’s terribly different and exotic, and yet it’s a place that feels familiar, as my name might indicate. My grandparents came from the toe of the Italian boot, Calabria, between Naples and Sicily. They came to America because they were peasants and ended up in Cleveland. They met in Cleveland, even though they’d lived in adjacent villages, adjacent mountain tops, really, in Calabria. He worked on the B&O railroad for fifty-four years. I grew up listening to them, my other relatives, and their friends, speaking in Calabrese dialect in a Cleveland accent.

That’s another thing. We carry inside us this magical place I’ve been talking about. But what about the places of our parents, and their parents, even the places of our children? We can’t be in only one place. In the old days in Cleveland, you lived on the same street, in the same house, and all your relatives lived around you. But even then you had other places. I often think about one of my father’s places. A young man just out of high school gets sent to Guadalcanal. It’s a world war. And we have all the photographs of him. He was a second lieutenant. With his men, tents, palm trees, rifles, and, of course, fighting. What a dislocation that must have been. But he was still Cleveland Giovanni, Cleveland Johnny, who just happened to be in the Solomon Islands, fighting the Japanese, writing moony letters back to his wife in Cleveland. I feel that I can appropriate some of his place because blood gives me that right.

Do some places, just by their singular qualities, ever force their way into your work?

I taught once at Marion Correctional Institution here in Ohio. In the first two quarters I taught Remedial Writing I and Remedial Writing II. I didn’t think much about it at first. I thought the students—their place—would be so foreign to me that I’d just be this kind of separate entity, not touched by the place, and leaving each day to go back where I belong. But I was amazed to find out that I had a lot in common with my students, as I always do. They were Ohioans, after all. Some were from my own neighborhood in Cleveland. And we had incredible things in common. They had so much to write about. I was touched by their place very much. In my book The House of Memory is a poem called “Marion Correctional, Basic Writing,” that I wrote from that experience. That place became my place. Of course, I was there two hours a day, three days a week, for one year only, whereas some of them were there twenty, thirty years, more. I’d get in there with my briefcase, and I’d be frisked. There was one guard who’d joke, “Got anything in there but poems, Doc?” I was moved by that place. Terribly new, and yet somehow familiar.
Through a Glass, Darkly

—for the students, who put me in my place

I'm all mouth, mustache, cane, grandiose Italian nose.
I squeak, speak in tongues, Cleveland, Little Italy.

But for you, these fevered weeks, I'm cuckoo,
vireo and finch, redbird, nighthawk, jay—
a squawk, a call at the windows of this stanza
called The Writing Room. Poetry, I try to say,

I crow, I swear. Poetry poetry poetry poetry.

—David Citino
As we move through Ohio, roads are closed everywhere we go. We’re detouring through towns we’ve never heard of. I imagine dreamy shortcuts that will save us, but more than once we turn down another hopeful street only to bump up against the “No Outlet” sign. My wife and I perfect a thumb movement, a jerking toward the back that says, “Back it up.” We use it for a laugh even when we’re on a straightaway.

The small towns in this part of the state are about the prettiest I’ve ever seen. Each is full of endless green lawns and 1880 houses, bright white with crisp green or black roofs. Nobody is scurrying; traffic is light and friendly. Even the town bank is an architectural beauty. A little girl sitting on a chair waves at us when we go by her house, her mom behind her twisting the little girl’s hair into two stubby pigtails.

In Norwalk, we get caught in the wrong lane. Momentarily we stop traffic in every direction while I work the steering wheel to find the right path. Nobody honks. Nobody flips me the bird. When I pick a direction, we all start moving again; and we push down yet another street with perfect houses, red flower planters on porches, a fat kid bouncing a ball, and a fire station done up in American flags with a banner announcing: “Pancake Breakfast, every Sunday.”

We get where we’re going in the late afternoon of the first day of the semester at Oberlin College. The campus is bustling, but beautiful. A middle quad of enormous relative size is ringed by benches, large painted rocks, and students of every variety walking back to dorms.

Martha Collins has given me directions to her Rice Hall office, but I stagger around campus awhile first, cursing the bag of equipment. Two girls wearing red “Lifeguard” sweatshirts are talking to a young man with a blank look on his face. He’s holding a crumpled piece of paper and is actually scratching his head.

When I find Martha in her office, she’s cheery. I’m tired from driving and have a head full of allergies to some of these gorgeous trees, but Martha’s smile is big and welcoming and we get to work. During the conversation she laughs easily. It’s clear she’s tickled by the discoveries my questions have brought. She talks about her work with real care. She doesn’t have a casual relationship to it. I get the feeling from the precision of her comments that her poems were written by an exacting woman, and even talking about them years later, she’s affording them the same kind of attention.
How has place impacted your poetry?

I probably couldn’t have answered that until fairly recently when I began to spend half the year in Ohio.

I grew up in the Midwest, in Des Moines, Iowa. I haven’t lived there since I graduated from high school, but there’s a poem in my first book called “The Farm.” It’s the most autobiographical poem I ever wrote; and although I didn’t in fact grow up on a farm, it’s about Iowa. “The Farm” takes on the question of place in a number of ways. It starts out negatively. I didn’t grow up on a farm. And then it says, “When you think about Iowa, you think about certain things, but you’re wrong.” The poem moves to Germany, where I spent some time. It moves to California, where I went to college. It ends up in New England, where I was at the time when I wrote the poem.

The poem, in retrospect, seems significant to me in terms of what I often do with place. Very often there is more than one place in a poem. I very rarely sit down and write about this place or that place. There’s always a little tension between “Here I am” and “There I was.” Here are the bare hills of New England; there were those lush cornfields in Iowa.

Can you think of a single physical space that influenced a piece very specifically?

My next book is made up of three sequences of poems, and one of them is called “A Book of Days.” It was written during a yearlong fellowship at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe. The Institute was then located in Radcliffe Yard, which is very Ivy League-y, with a lot of brick buildings, a lot of trees, and grass. I thought I was going to write a book-length poem about some people traveling all the way across the country, and the first sequence of the book is in fact the beginning of that. It’s called “Images of Women in American Literature, Part One.” Well, the characters only get past Niagara Falls into Canada, because I stopped. And the reason that I stopped was that I was sitting in an office in Radcliffe Yard for the entire year. I started writing out of the experience of sitting there and staring out the window, and what resulted was a thirty-part sequence called “A Book of Days.” The poems are not descriptions of what I’m looking at thirty times around. But what I’m seeing is often the basis or starting point for a poem. I think that’s most frequently true for me, that place is one of several starting points.

You don’t live in Oberlin full time. Does it feel like home to you?

I think that being in a place that is not my home tends to make me think about place more than being in my home. Getting away from
my usual place makes me conscious of place, not only the place where I am, but also the places I’ve been. Strange places evoke familiar and different places.

The opening poem in my third book is called “The Border.” I’ve been thinking about borders for a long time. I’m obsessed with the idea of borders. The poem is a collage. It starts with a kind of “tourist Spanish” that might be heard on a Mexican-American border. But then it moves across a lot of different borders—geographical, psychological, social. That poem seems to define who I am. That I’m never content to sit anyplace: I’m always on a border between here and there.
Linda Gregerson  
Ann Arbor, Michigan  

Linda Gregerson lives in an idyllic setting north and west of Ann Arbor. It’s impossible to imagine that there are towns or cities anywhere near this place, set amidst barns, pumpkin fields, and endless trees. The only thing I can think of this morning more beautiful than this spot are Linda’s poems themselves.

Linda’s home opens into a wooded area. A brook awaits a hundred feet away, and deer and woodchuck often come to peruse her self-described “suburban” garden. We sit on white chairs on a porch and let the warm breeze blow through our conversation.

She shows me around the yard a bit, pointing out plants given to her by some dear friends. I’m looking for a woodchuck, however. The plants can wait. Ever since she said woodchuck, I’ve been singing that childhood song in my head.

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What roles have the places you’ve lived and the natural world had on your work?

Huge and incalculable. One spends a certain amount of time sitting at the desk, or the kitchen table, or out on the screened porch, staring as one works. And I’m sure that space and material place have consequences far beyond my conscious awareness. I mean, in some of the obvious ways it lends itself thematically.

There’s a little creek that runs out there (pointing into the area that bounds her backyard). The road is called Hidden Brook Lane, and there’s actually a hidden brook that eventually makes its way toward the Huron River.

And this place, the trees, the snow, the deer, the woodchucks have big consequences, as well as the hum of the refrigerator and the chance to go out and weed in my garden.

But I’m sure there are other things. I’m sure the proportion of the room, the height of the ceiling, whether or not one can have some air coming in the window eventually influences the shapes of stanzas or the breath units in a poem. I’m confident of that. The realm of the aesthetic is not some extracted realm of theorized beauty. Aesthetic just means feeling, and the realm of the aesthetic has both wealth of components
and all kinds of ways of occurring under the radar. Poetry relies so much on the material properties of language.

*Some of the poets I’ve spoken with have admitted a great debt to the landscape of their childhood. Where did yours take place and how do you think it’s affected your work?*

I grew up in the Midwest—northern Illinois, and Wisconsin. My grandparents and other members of the family farm there to this day. So the logic of a certain kind of upper midwestern small town makes a lot of sense to me. The logic of American upper Midwest farm fields, the layout of them, the scrub oak that’s in between, the way there will be a grouping of farm buildings in a certain way. It’s not only the case in other climates, the Southwest, or the mountains, or the Southeast, but even in comparable climates it’s not the same idiom, say, in a European country. It’s about proportion, about how much space the buildings take up compared to the crops. It’s all that sort of stuff, and there’s also a vernacular architecture that’s very warm.

*There’s a really rich sense of nature in your work, especially the work in Waterborne. What are you trying to do with those elements?*

My body’s relationship to the natural world has largely been one of hostility. I’m terribly asthmatic. I have terrible allergies. Almost everything lovely, interesting, and living makes me sick, makes me sick in a literal way. I was always terribly sickly as a child. I was never good for anything useful. I could never mow the lawn. And indeed, as an adult, when I was in graduate school in California and stuff didn’t get killed off by winter, I got progressively sicker and sicker until my life was almost not livable.

So it’s not just the usual, standard-issue oblivion that characterizes some youth, but it was also this medical, this invalid, plastic shell that augmented it. Really, the living—the free breathing in a world of grasses and trees and the local woodchuck—is a phenomenon of middle age. It’s a blessing; it’s quite belated. I’m now the gardener, which is hilarious, because I’m quite inept at it. But I’m out there, enthusiastically, with my mulch, with my soil enrichers. It’s very new. I’m learning, primer level, ABCs. Remedial living in the growing world. And, it’s thrilling.

But clearly this life—my bit of digging around in the dirt and planting bulbs, studying up on woody perennials—is exceedingly suburban. I can’t pretend it’s got anything of the wilderness about it. It really is about this tiny little margin where America of a certain wealth and leisure gets to allow the claims of a wilder, nonhuman universe to make claims or assert its presence on a certain scale. It’s about how people—who entirely need the world—and the world, which doesn’t remotely need us at all, find little patches of intersection where we can accommodate one another. Where we gain some purchase, and understanding, and
It seems to me that a lot of your work springs from physical places rather than events.

In some ways physical place is most keenly for me the place of daily habit. So, for instance, a poem called the "History Play" began because I was finally trying to catch up with some filing—I save playbills from when we go to the theater—and there were some bits of gold foil that I had saved. My husband is also a Shakespearean, and he and the girls and I spend summers in England when we're able to and go to lots of plays. We'd gone to a production in Stratford of Henry VIII, and in the final scene when there's the celebration of Elizabeth's christening, they dropped all sorts of little shapes, flowers—basically bits of daub made out of gold foil from the ceiling—and I saved some of it as a remembrance. And they have a very strong evocative power for me. It was really about the bit of domestication that we as a family enact in the places we return to. I used the scene of that play as the occasion, and used some language from that, and also used the problem of history. It's called a history play, not so much because it's about kings and queens, but about the whole notion of history and reenacting it and what that does for human imagination.

I think time eludes us so much. We're here so briefly, you know, the kids are little and the next minute they're leaving us—our elder daughter went off to college this year. But it's also a way of trying to rescue a little moment. It's partly elegy. It's celebration of the family we are, and elegy to the family we were, and our way of trying to stave off the dissipation of ongoing time. And so much more important than that particular evening at the theatre was the little routine we had around going to the play. There's a little walking route that we take to the theatre at night and back to the hotel afterward, and it goes over a bridge. And because it's Stratford, there are swans on the river below. And so it was emphatically about place and the way one can be given some friendliness on the part of place, simply by returning to it and savoring it in memory. It's about the intersection of physical place and habits. That connectedness is both very dear and very fragile.
Writers work everywhere. Poets can scribble on notebooks in planes and in hotel rooms. Some use every part of their homes: the study, the bedroom, even backyard sheds.

But Richard Tillinghast is the winner of the porch sweepstakes. While rain threatens from the southern skies, Richard and I sit out on his porch on either end of a large, bulky sofa. The sofa is pinned in by books, notepads, and a set of homemade flash cards, from which Richard is learning Turkish grammar for an upcoming trip to his beloved Istanbul.

He shows me some great photos from his travels, and we go through how his geographical wanderings have informed his writing over a long and productive career. While we talk, his neighbors go by out front, and it seems everyone has a dog or two. We’re in the middle of Ann Arbor, a college town where professors and students live near each other and their shared home—the university.

But Richard is on leave right now. He’s just come back from upstate New York, where he was a featured instructor at a conference. Soon he’ll be back in Istanbul, where he will meet and talk with Turkish writers—and use his improving language skills.

I wonder about this porch. Who will keep it running in his absence?

How has place impacted your work?

Hugely. I don’t know where I got this idea—something in some book about Native American thought, perhaps. I remember getting the idea that they feel that it isn’t just what you are thinking or perceiving, but it’s you in combination with where you are thinking and feeling. There’s no such thing as separating the individual from the place.

But when I think about writers and a sense of place, I always think of writers who have stayed in the same place. William Faulkner in Mississippi and Marcel Proust in Paris, to pick two really different examples. But the way my life has turned out, I’ve lived so many different places; and every place I’ve gone has been reflected in my poetry, whether it be the South, California, New England, Ireland.
Has your work always reflected your interest in place?

I’ve kept that interest in place all the way through. What really made an impact on me were three Southern writers that I discovered in high school: John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Faulkner. Oxford, Mississippi, is only eighty miles from Memphis. It’s a straight shot, and I used to remember the number of the highway. The fact that those writers wrote about a landscape that was familiar to me was really empowering. That gave me the sense that this was a landscape I knew. And I think that the poet who influenced me the most when I first started writing was Ransom.

One of the things I learned when I was writing The Stonecutter’s Hand, when I was writing the poems based in Ireland, is I think you can write more effectively about place if you’re not always naming the place. If you’re always naming the place, you run the risk of having it sound like tourist poetry. I think the trick that I’ve learned now is to write about the place without saying what place it is.

But my position on that, traditionally, would be a hard position to defend, because there is in Irish writing, in dínseanchas, a kind of a charting of all the different places in Ireland through poetry. Seamus Heaney does that very consciously, and the old poets writing in Irish did that. And if you think of Southern music, “Tulsa Queen” and all the songs, “Memphis Blues” and all that. And that’s a very strong tradition too.

What are your thoughts about regionalism in poetry?

Well, you’re talking to a Tennessee boy, who hasn’t lived in Tennessee—with the exception of one year—since 1962. That’s a long time ago. I still consider myself a Tennessean. I think I would like to have been a regional poet, but the circumstances in my life have made it impossible. I’ve always been a traveler. I’ve lived in Massachusetts for a very good chunk of time. And I’ve lived in California for a dozen years, and now I’ve been living in Michigan for twenty years. We bought this house in 1984, and my youngest child was two weeks old. I would be flattered if Southern poets thought of me as a Southern poet, but I don’t know whether they do or not. Just think of all the great writing that has come from poets we think of as regional poets. I guess it’s worked out for me that I’m a poet of several regions. And I feel bound to each of these regions. It took me a long time to relate to Michigan, because the landscape—on the surface of it—doesn’t appeal to me, I guess because it’s so flat. I’m a fly fisherman, and I now spend a lot of time up in northern Michigan every summer, so now I feel that connect. So I guess if I lived long enough, I’d become a Michigan poet.
Do you think you’ve captured a place in that way, turning a real place into a sort of mythic or poetic place?

Istanbul. That’s a place. Certainly it’s one of the oldest cities in the world. All the layers of history. I think I’ve done pretty well. That’s my latest infatuation, with that city. And talking to Turkish writers or anyone who loves that city. They seem to enjoy reading my poems about that city. But the difference between going to someplace that you don’t know at all and experiencing it fresh without any background, that’s great. But then going someplace where you know all the history. I like to experience a place in a multilayered way.
Wake Me in South Galway

Wake me in South Galway, or better yet
In Clare. You’ll know the pub I have in mind.
Improvise a hearse—one of those decrepit
Postal vans would suit me down to the ground—
A rust-addled Renault, Kelly green with a splash
Of Oscar Wilde yellow stirred in to clash
With the dazzling perfect meadows and limestone
On the coast road from Kinvara down toward Ballyvaughan.

Once you’ve got in off the road at Newquay
Push aside some barstools and situate me
Up in front by the door where the musicians sit,
Their table crowded with pints and a blue teapot,
A pouch of Drum, some rolling papers and tin
Whistles. Ask Charlie Piggott to play a tune
That sounds like loss and Guinness, turf smoke and rain,
While Brenda dips in among the punters like a hedge-wren.

Will I hear it? Maybe not. But I hear it now.
The smoke of the music fills my nostrils, I feel the attuned
Box and fiddle in harness, pulling the plough
Of the melody, turning the bog-dark, root-tangled ground.
Even the ceramic collie on the windowsill
Cocks an ear as the tune lifts and the taut sail
Of the Galway hooker trills wildly in its frame on the wall,
Rippling to the salt pulse and seabreeze of a West Clare reel.

Many a night, two octaves of one tune,
We sat here side by side, your body awake
To a jig or slide, me mending the drift of a line
As the music found a path to my notebook.
Lost in its lilt and plunge I would disappear
Into the heathery freedom of a slow air
Or walk out under the powerful stars to clear
My head of thought and breathe their cooled-down fire.
When my own session ends, let me leave like that,
Porous to the wind that blows off the ocean.
Goodbye to the company and step into the night
Completed and one-off, like a well-played tune—
Beyond the purified essence of hearth fires
Rising from the life of the parish, past smoke and stars,
Released from everything I've done and known.
I won't go willingly, it’s true, but I’ll be gone.

—Richard Tillinghast