Poets On Place
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Death Valley

This project started in part because I believe that where we live and work has a tremendous effect on how we live and work. I grew up in small towns all across Canada, but in my adulthood I have lived in cities all across the U.S.—Phoenix, Dallas, D.C., Miami, and others. I romanticized this trip out of all proportion for several months before starting it, but I continue to be amazed at how gorgeous and varied the big country is.

A short break in the interview schedule allows us some time, and we decide to take a couple of days in the remote and beautiful Death Valley National Park. We arrive at Stovepipe Wells at midday, the temperature a polite and friendly 65 degrees. Stovepipe Wells is a little outpost in the middle of the big valley. There is space for about fifty RVs in the national park area—no electricity or water. And there are fourteen spots with power and water right alongside the desolate and barely traveled Highway 190.

At night the place is dead silent. About every hour or so a car might headlight through, headed either to Los Angeles or Nevada. We sit out under the stars and a three-quarter moon and just soak in the quiet. The desert gives up its heat easily out here at night, and the lows are in the mid-thirties.

In the mornings we sit outside again in our coats and watch the sun poke up over the Funeral Mountains and light the desert floor all over again. We don’t talk about it. We just let it bathe us, warm us. Sometimes my wife will get up and wander away, through part of the desert. A quarter mile away, and I can still actually hear her shoes scuff the desert floor. I watch some kind of hardy spider work out from beneath a rock and then head out on his own path.

Out there, I think we both feel it. The cares and worries of our old life, the working life, the city life, have disappeared. This is not a vacation. It was a breaking of one life and the opening of a new one.
Donald Revell & Claudia Keelan
Las Vegas, Nevada

Donald Revell and I stand under a brilliant blue sky laced with Las Vegas’s ever-present jet contrails. We’re in the backyard of the house that Revell shares with his wife, the poet Claudia Keelan, and their son, Ben. We’re south and west of Vegas near a tiny settlement called Blue Diamond.

Like most people who live in Vegas, Revell lives nowhere near The Strip, the gaudy and garish main drag littered with gigantic casinos. Vegas is a city like most cities. You’ve got your downtown, your suburbs. There’s industry (here it’s roulette, showgirls, and magicians). And it’s populated by a wide variety of folks: friendly, happy, creepy, noisy, kind, et cetera. People from all over the world come here for vacations, but the real citizens shop, drive, work, just like it was a regular place.

Keelan runs the MFA program here in Vegas, but Revell commutes once a week to Salt Lake City to be a part of the excellent program at the University of Utah.

When Keelan joins us, we sit in patio chairs near their newly installed lap pool. Revell points out the spare desert landscaping. Everything out here was planted by him and Keelan, including a lovely acacia, and—surprisingly—seven full-size Christmas trees. While we’re talking, I can see their son Ben peering at me through the blinds of a back window. I suspect he’d rather be inside than listening to the old folks outside.

Keelan is originally from California, and Revell comes from the Bronx. But they both are at home in the desert. Their work, too, is heavily influenced by the empty spaces of their adopted home, especially in Keelan’s Utopic and Revell’s My Mojave.

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What sort of role has place played in your life?

DR: I must be naive or just lucky. I’ve found every place I’ve lived to be—essentially—pastoral. I didn’t know the South Bronx was a slum until years after I’d left it. I grew up in a three-room apartment. My sister and I had the bedroom; my parents slept on the sofa bed in the living room. It was sort of like “The Honeymooners.” That was our apartment. The laundry went out the kitchen window. But I have nothing but good memories. I remember what might have been the only tree. I remember a little bit of grass, and I remember nice people. I know it was a very dark, urban landscape, but I just don’t remember it that way.
My whole life has had that continuity of pastoral, green decency. I was so lucky because my parents were very kind. I think everyone was aware that the physical circumstances of my childhood were difficult. In terms of material things, in terms of access to certain kinds of pleasures, we didn’t have those. But if you’ve never had them, you don’t miss them. And as they did become available, they were wonderful. A class trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A class trip to a farm in upstate New York. Sort of like a Thomas Traherne moment (laughs). Wonders!

As the understanding of my circumstances grew, my circumstances became easier, gentler. Only in retrospect can I say I grew up in a terrible slum, because I have no memory of a slum. Going back there now as an adult makes me sad. I’d never live in New York again. My mother still does, and she’d never live anywhere else. I’ve lost the knack. I must have had whatever mindset is necessary, but I couldn’t go back there. And I’ve never written a word of poetry there.

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve had to work harder and go further to maintain my innocence, my pastoral naiveté. You have to be crafty to be naive.

You guys really have a nice spot here, and it looks like a great place to live. Are you conscious of the fact that you’re building a place to live, but also a place for your son to grow up?

CK: What you see now is the finishing of seven years. Mostly we planted everything by ourselves. Every year we’ve gotten a Christmas tree—in fact we’re going to get one tomorrow. (She starts to point at them.) There’s that one, and look at this one over here. This one’s huge. That’s not even the oldest; it’s only three years old. I think it’s in the septic field (laughs). There are more over there.

So we planted most of these trees by ourselves, which was very hard, because this is all caliche. And we didn’t have enough money to landscape it until this last summer. For a long time it was very daunting to be here. It’s hot six months of the year, really hot. The kind of way people feel in Alaska, where they get housebound. You get the same kind of thing here. The children can’t play outside. For me it was really hard to imagine a landscape. For one thing, I grew up in California in a really lush landscape and lived in Boston, lived in the South. And when I came here, I was terrified. It was really my concept of a kind of a hell.
And then I started to open myself up to the place. And now I notice any color there is. When I go anyplace else now, I’m just in awe of color. Here, the sky is dominant. And I love that. And it’s empty. And that emptiness has become an important part to me. So much of American poetry is about the eye, and it seems to me that here I’ve developed my ear a lot more, listening. Listening to solitude. Listening to what happens in the desert, which is interesting.

_Donald, in your most recent collection, My Mojave, place exists but is not always named or obvious. How do you think you use place?_

DR: Place uses me. Because more and more over the years I’ve come to trust in what’s given at the moment of composition rather than what’s intended. I’ve been rereading George Herbert’s _The Temple_ these past mornings and noticing, as I didn’t notice when I was a student, how much he surrenders himself to his eyesight. I loved that in Traherne but didn’t remember it in Herbert. And in poets of the twentieth century, like (Ezra) Pound and Ronald Johnson, I’ve really treasured that sense of “I will open my eyes and be given the poem.” As Herbert says, “If I but lift mine eyes, my suit is made.”

The place will compose itself via me. Writing becomes more and more an act of trust and less an act of craft. So place isn’t just important, it’s almost everything. The poem will be what it is because of where I’m writing it. Luckily for me, where I am is where I am. For the most part, and in _My Mojave_ entirely, the place wrote the poem. In terms of “I lifted my eyes,” as Herbert says, and there it was; there was the poem. And the poem continues as long as my attention continues. I’m always telling my students, “The longer you look, the more you will see.” A Yogi Berra sort of thing, but it has some bump to it. If your eyes stay open, your eyes will be filled. When first you move to the desert, you almost recoil. How can we do this? How can we live here? And then slowly, if you pay attention, the desert teaches you how to live here. It teaches you what to look for; it teaches you to see how beautiful it is, how subtle it is, how full it is. It translates into a way of thinking about poems. A poem is not empty. Even if there are twenty words in it, it’s still full. And if there are twenty-one words, the poem is still just full.

_Claudia, how do you use this landscape in your own work?_

CK: There’s a lot of space in my poetry, especially in _Utopic_. That book was really informed by absence, and by waiting, and the solitude.

For a long time there were only two houses here. There was no wall. I sat at the table and just looked out the window. Or sat out here and wrote and was informed by my breath and by the relative lack of vision, but also of rhythms, internal rhythms and natural rhythms of living in a place for seven years. So that space, that emptiness. And the wind
is everywhere in my poems because the wind is dominant. Ben’s first word was “wind.” “Wind wind.” And he was really trying to figure out what it is. Because it howls. And when that wall wasn’t there . . . (makes whooshing wind sound).

My father died two years ago here, in our house; and we just sort of decided that we, too, were going to die, and we were going to finish our house and live in it.

There’s also the sound of construction around here all the time and the sound of airplanes. It’s very funny because it’s a desert that’s being invaded. But there’s always the sense of the invasion. When you first move here you think, “So what, it’s just a bunch of scrub grass.” But then you start to notice the one-barrel cactus out there that blooms. The purple sage that comes up at certain times. And really know the flowers. And start to feel this sense of propriety.

Donald, you and Claudia and Ben live here, but you commute regularly to Utah. Salt Lake City and Las Vegas seem like an odd combination? Do you see similarities in them?

DR: Both cities, both cultures are improvised in a vacuum. Both cities are tributes to the improvisational nature of American spirituality. Is that a real religion, or did you make that up? Is that a real city, or did you make that up? It’s like that Robert Creeley line: “Is that a real poem, or did you write it yourself?” It has that kind of weightlessness and goofiness that is, nevertheless, compelling. Believing in something believable doesn’t impress me. But believing in something you know is about an hour and a half old requires a leap of faith. Both of these cities were built by faith alone. There should not be a city here, in Las Vegas. And there shouldn’t be a city in Salt Lake. I get the feeling they made a wrong turn. They really should have been going further north, because the Cache Valley is so green and beautiful. It’s the combination of faith and goofiness that connects the places. I find myself fooled and awed by it. I don’t use that word goofy dismissively. I use it with a tremendous respect and desire to be able to emulate it. In the days right after September 11, I felt that we were living in the last innocent places in America. That somehow Salt Lake City and Las Vegas hadn’t changed. They weren’t rooted. They could simply float above events. I’m sure the city fathers of both cities would be troubled by that.

Both cities are founded on the idea that “Well, we’re not going to be here long.” In Las Vegas, you’re going to make a lot of money and go somewhere else. In Salt Lake City, you’re going to heaven. These are way stations.

CK: They’re both promised lands in a sense. One is a religious Zion, and the other is a capitalist Zion. And they float around those promises
very well. And on the other hand, Las Vegas is a place where people come to be unreal. And it’s very interesting to be a person conducting a life where people come to forget their lives. And in a certain sense there’s a sorrow in the life of a city that is used in such a way.

You see it in the old casinos and the old casino workers. The fact that their lives are the background for America’s playground. That’s poignant. It’s also a very utopian place for a large part of the population who wouldn’t be able to own a house or get a job that paid good benefits and let them put their kids to school without the casinos. Housemaids own houses with pools here.

There’s the poignancy of the unreality of the city. Because Las Vegas is a simulacrum of all other places.
A Parish in the Bronx

The moving filaments of traffic shadow
the people and jagged, stationary cars
in a church parking lot below the highway.
Anyone leaving the late mass has a choice,
a lucky one. He can look up as far
as the highway and believe in so many lights
moving fast. Or he can look up farther
to the spire razored in floodlights,
taller than the traffic or the near buildings,
and picture himself that high, that visible.

Some choices are too easy to make
only because nothing hangs in the balance.
Coming out of the darkness of a church
into a dark neighborhood smeared beneath pylons,
nobody has anything to lose
between the heavens of the fast cars
and of the spire razored where everyone can see.
I felt so lucky when I stood there.
I felt like the last organ note of a hymn
huge inside of the nothing that comes afterwards.

There is no room between eternity
and the loneliness inside a car
and the loneliness of the floodlights cutting
tall scaffold into the night sky.
I came out of mass and made a choice
lucky to believe the choice mattered.
The fast cars sped out of the city to dances
and marriages. The sharp spire
laddered upwards into the easy fame
of the last note of a hymn held forever.
I am no dancer. And marriage
never gets to the end of anything.
I chose the perspectiveless, tall nonsense
of God’s noise aloft over the jagged parish,
thinking everything else was a dream
too lonely for words. It was, but just as lonely
is praying that all wives return, all dogs live.
Eternity takes up all the room in the world.
You can’t drive fast enough. You can’t picture yourself
so high that the dead see you and come home.

—Donald Revell
Alberto Rios
Chandler, Arizona

Alberto Rios and the family dog Kino welcome me to their home in Chandler. We’re just south of Phoenix, where Rios teaches at Arizona State, my alma mater. I went to school here in the late ’70s and early ’80s, met my wife here, and drove fast and wild on the desert highways in and around Phoenix when I was indestructible. It’s my first visit in almost twenty years. Oddly, I hardly ever think about this as my college hometown. I just wasn’t much of a student. I didn’t think much about class, went as seldom as I could, and really just visited campus when I had to. (Not that I’d recommend that for any of the kids . . . stay in school, stay off the pipe!)

Rios and I read at the same function more than twenty years ago, although neither of us remembers too much about it. We sit in the front room, and we talk about what it’s like for me to be back in Arizona after all this time.

He tells me about his first poetry, scribbled in the back of his school notebooks. As he recalls it, the only thing the back of the notebook was used for was spitballs and stuff you could write but couldn’t show anyone else. He remembers that he was writing for himself then, not for school, not for assignment, not for a grade. It was an important but solitary part of his progress, and he wonders what a more organized introduction to poetry might have done to him.

As an important and influential poet, he clearly has had numerous opportunities to go elsewhere, nearer the hubs of publishing and academia; but he’s chosen—both consciously and subconsciously, I’d imagine—to stay here, within an easy afternoon drive of his hometown. The Southwest is his place, a place to live and work, but more importantly the place that is inside him and his poetry.

What has been the impact of place on your poetry?

I think it’s been profound. It’s everything. I grew up in Nogales on the border, which is a line, and knowing that if you crossed that line, something else, something different was going to happen. Different laws. Different people. Different language. Different ideas.

Even as a child you recognized something about that liminality, about that in-between place. And I’ve since thought it was a lot like
going to sleep and beginning to dream. You cross over into something. And even though I spoke the language and knew what Mexico meant—I was living on the Arizona side—I still recognized that something was changed. And when I say “changed,” I don’t just mean in a surface way, not just the decorative nature of what the streets looked like. Everything that you could count on here was simply turned around there, the way you turn a diamond around. It’s an equal shine, an equal glint, but it’s not the same glint. And it’s never ceased to amaze me. Even today, I think I write from that. It’s what gives me a sense of freedom in that I never have to be happy with saying one thing about something.

I think that also comes from growing up with multiple languages and multiple cultures. For every single thing, one name, one word doesn’t work. And that has helped me as a writer. So when I think of place, I don’t just think of a physical land; it’s a sensibility of groundedness. When I write, I don’t write about this house, and I don’t write about the Chandler I’m living in now. And it’s not that I write out of childhood necessarily, but I think I write about that time which childhood marked. When I say Nogales, I don’t mean Nogales today. It’s a very different place, and I have a hard time recognizing it myself. And when I say Nogales, I mean both sides, and the paradigm of the two Nogaleses.

*What sort of role do you think landscape or place is best used for in poetry?*

To me, it’s to raise something of my humanness. It goes back to that diamond turning I was talking about before. Poetry is a lot of fun because you get to do it quickly, where you just start with something like a nature image that I’ve just encountered. I just turn it over and let it take me where it wants to go. So metaphor and simile and the wild adventure that they offer take over. If I’m patient enough, that thing will eventually come around and tell me a story or a poem. It’s an examination. Each time it’s a discovery, and if I can convey that suddenly new moment—it’s the age-old notion of “make it new”—I let language and experience take part in that moment. As writers we’re all too eager to answer questions neatly, but that having been said, there are no rules. Everything I’ve just said I’m just as likely to break the next time I’m into a poem. That’s a hard thing to explain to the world, because everyone wants to buy a book or go to a class and learn how to do it. But the fact of it is you learn how it’s been done, not how to do it. That part is up to you.

*What is it about Arizona? What is it that makes it such a big part of your poetry, and what is it that keeps you here? And do you think poets have some sort of responsibility to their places?*
I am a native and have lived here all my life. Even though I’ve visited many other places, Arizona is so central to my whole life that I probably don’t know the answer to that. I probably don’t have the perspective to answer that with real clarity.

When I went to high school, it was an astounding time. It was before we were doing all these education initiatives. It was before we were worrying about dropout rates. There were about a hundred of us who graduated high school, but there were a thousand in the freshman class. It was hard, because in Nogales there were things like the produce industry where you could make a lot of money real fast in six months, but that amount of money was all you were going to make. It seemed like a lot. There was also the beginning of drug trading and a lot of other things. And that dropout rate was astounding.

Nogales High School in that sense was more of a vocational school. It wasn’t a college prep kind of school. And if it was, it was a dismal failure. It meant that I wasn’t particularly prepared for college, and in balance, after a long life, that’s been a positive thing for me personally. I certainly wouldn’t recommend it. But it meant that college was an adventure. College was no big looming thing. For me, it was just thirteenth grade, because I didn’t know how else to experience it. And I went through; I survived it.

There were only a few who made it through. The others have all gone away, because they’re commodities. People who made it who had that background, particular abilities in language and all that sort of stuff, were commodities, and they’ve all gone away. And I’ve had every opportunity to leave as well.

The hardest choice—and I’ve tried not to make it a confrontational choice with myself—has been to stay. Because I could have done all sorts of things, in all sorts of places, had a very different kind of success, I think, had I been willing to go where the action is. I think staying here has been an act of responsibility. People often ask me if I’m happy here, and that’s completely the wrong question. And in fact it’s one I try not to even ask myself. Because I might be happy in Paris! But is this the place I can probably make a difference and where I need to be? I think so.
Richard Shelton
Tucson, Arizona

When Richard and his wife Lois built their house in the foothills of the Tucson Mountains in 1961, they were one of only three residents in the vast and unscrubbed Sonoran desert some ten miles west of Tucson. They and their young son relished the remote location, but scorpions and one spectacularly dog-hungry Gila monster made the land a little more hostile than a similar area nearer the city.

But Shelton wouldn’t trade the experience or the location. While it’s true that the neighbors have arrived over the past thirty years, the spot is still breathtaking. Unlike the desert areas right around Phoenix, which I’ve just left, Tucson’s desert is packed with cacti, hundreds of thorny “platypus” or pancake cacti jammed in every square city block of space. And up on the foothills where Shelton lives, the inhospitable nature of the place is still apparent. Sure, there are concrete roads that wind in and around the adobe-colored homes; but a foot off the main road and you’re on gravel and rock, and the desert is everywhere.

As always, I’m interested in a poet’s place, and it’s obvious this place has beauty. Shelton talks about the transformational nature of the desert, a place that in summer can still be scorching in the middle of a moon-filled night.

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How do you think the places of your life have influenced the work you’ve done as a poet?

I think they’ve influenced the work I’ve done profoundly. I have always lived in the desert or on the edge of the desert. I was raised in Boise, Idaho, which is on the edge of an incredible desert, the Snake River Plain Desert. Then I went to west Texas to school, in the Chihuahua Desert. And then I came here; the Army sent me to Fort Huachuca, and I was so fascinated with the landscape that I decided to stay when I got out of the Army. I took the closest job. In a sense, I’ve always lived in or very near a desert. When I get into the deep woods, I become claustrophobic. I notice that in the city—tall buildings—I get a little claustrophobic. I enjoy going to New York, but after a week I’m quite ready to leave; the excitement is over. I think it’s conditioning from earliest childhood that the desert landscape suits me.
Big vistas; big distance; I have to see the spaces. From this house you can see completely across the valley to the mountains. I don't think that's an accident. Space is what I've always needed.

*Because this landscape has been so much a part of your life, do you think that there's anything in the desert that has had an influence on the process of your writing? What kind of habits do you have?*

I'm very slow. Undisciplined. Terribly undisciplined. I'll write in spurts. I did write for many years only at night, because that was the only time I had. I was teaching full time and wanted to spend time with my family during the day. So after they went to bed, I'd write, and I'd write all night. This was the first house here, and for all those years all I had to do was walk out that door and I was in the desert. I could go out, hike around for a couple of hours, and then come back and write. I didn't necessarily write about what I saw in those couple of hours, but I do remember going out and staring at the moon—and I have a lot of moon poems.

So that certainly shows up in the work. You get the nocturnal desert again and again and again, because I would wander around in the desert at night. I have no fear of the desert. A lot of people are afraid of the desert, and I don't understand that. It's much safer than just about anywhere else you can be. It's certainly much safer than downtown Tucson. I don't know if it's had much to do with process, except that my process is very relaxed, open, and sort of disheveled, the way the desert is.

*I'm seeing all of the regions of the U.S. this year, and every region has something singular about it that makes it unique. What is it about the Southwest for you?*

The quality of the air and the quality of the light. It's more nearly like the Mediterranean than anywhere else in this country. And there's a similar quality of light and air in southern Italy, Greece, and so on. I don't know of anywhere else in the country with this light and air, and, of course, it's because of the light that so many painters come here.

And that intense, dry heat. It's an astonishing thing. I remember the first summer I spent here. I'd spent nearly all of my summers in Idaho, so it wasn't so hot. The first summer I spent here, I can remember going outside at midnight or one in the morning and it was still 100 degrees. And that does something very strange to you. It disorients you, and you do things you wouldn't normally do—fortunately not too many of them are illegal (*laughs*). It excites you, stimulates you, and I think that may be one of the reasons why so much of my poetry was written at night in the summer. It's a combination of the air and the dry heat at a time of day when your body is not accustomed to it. Your body expects things to cool off, and it doesn't here, not all the time.
So you don’t see the desert, with all of its critters, rocks, and cacti as a hostile place?

No. I think the desert is about the most benign environment I can think of. There’s space. Because of the lack of water the plants are spaced. Yes, a lot of them are pretty dangerous—prickly. A lot of cacti, but you soon get over that. But things are spaced so you can walk right through the desert. It’s not like a thick forest with a lot of undergrowth, something impenetrable. It’s open.

And the moonlit nights. Because of the color of the earth—it’s very pale—it’s very light. In the fall semester, I normally take a group of students to a wash, way out in Saguaro West, and we read poetry by moonlight. We don’t need a flashlight. It’s bright enough that you can read by moonlight. Those washes are like desert beaches, white sand and gorgeous.

Over the past forty years, Tucson has gotten closer and closer. How do you feel as the city encroaches on your desert?

Many of my poems have to do with the destruction of this desert, even this part of the desert, the Tucson Mountains. We do have the Saguaro West monument and Tucson Mountain Park, which has saved a great deal—so you can see what it was like. I did buy land further out to try to escape from the crowd, but my wife didn’t want to do that. She wanted to be closer to town, so we stayed here and just added on to this home. But I would have preferred to be further away.

I think what I have done in my poetry is interpreted the desert, the Sonoran desert, through the lens of my own despair at its destruction. I think I have done more to write about what’s out there (pointing to the foothills behind us) than almost anybody, but that doesn’t mean you’re getting a photograph, a painting. You’re getting an attitude.
Local Knowledge

For Michael Hogan

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

—Richard Shelton
Jane Miller
Tucson, Arizona

Like her colleague Richard Shelton, Jane Miller lives across the valley from the gorgeous Santa Catalina Mountains, which ring the eastern landscape outside Tucson, Arizona. It’s been nearly twenty years since my wife and I left Arizona, so before I knock on Miller’s front door, I stand there and soak in some of the endless and bathing sunlight. It’s cool today, in the seventies, but I know what it’s like here. In a few weeks it’ll be 110 in the shade, and by then we’ll be many miles down the road.

Miller greets me at the door in the midst of this little daydream and invites me in. We look around her stunning and large adobe home and then sit in her great room: Mexican tile, twelve-foot windows, a piano that Jane is learning to play.

She tells me a little bit about hiking the trails in and around this hillside house. I ask about the local wildlife (spiders, snakes, and such), and she admits that she’s skittish about the snakes and sees a variety of these desert creatures regularly enough. She tells me about a recent party they had here where visitors from elsewhere came across a scorpion out on the back patio; and I spend the next several minutes watching around my feet for something speedy and small.

Do you think place has played a role in what you write?

Yes. I’ve moved around a lot, from Provincetown Bay to Tomales Bay and all points in between; and topography, weather, the bustle of the marketplace, the presence of a border here between southern Arizona and Mexico—all these manifestations feed my imagination. Reality and the imagination, it seems to me, have an inexplicably successful marriage.

I like to walk as much as I can. The first thing I do is set out every morning. It’s a meditation. Not that I then set about describing impressions; I’m not naturalistic in the way I write. I like to leap and make associations and unusual, even unrealistic, connections. I prefer the expressionism that results, and which, for me, makes a heightened reality. For example, on a very hot day here in the desert, when I’m out walking, all the dirt and cacti and gravel are a moonscape. Cacti don’t really blow in the wind. There’s a feeling of stopped time that has advised me about exploding, expanding a moment in poetry and prose. I’m sure
this is quite different from the action of, say, a flat Floridian landscape. So, form—diction, syntax—is a kind of dreamscape of the terrain. And then, of course, subjects rise up as matter-of-factly, and as forcefully, as islands appear to someone sailing a ship. Who could live in this place and not be aware, for example, of Mexicans trying to cross into this country every day, many without enough water, and against all odds?

*Are there specific places that may have had an even more direct effect on your process?*

When I’m happy and have been able to make a place home, I feel free to write. I don’t write very well when I’m miserable, and the feel of a place, with its friendly or unfriendly trees, coyotes with nerves on edge—it can all get rather anthropomorphic—definitely affects my internal weather.

I remember the wonderful trails of Humboldt County (California) with spongy soil. I felt buoyant, really, and that no doubt got projected onto the page. And the place was glowing in mist. Thinking of those days, I am certain that the landscape and the spirit of the place had a huge effect on the thinking I do.

Experiencing a wavy landscape—heat waves, ocean waves—creates a certain harmonic peace for me, which may have led to my long, clausal sentence structure. And, of course, it’s no surprise that the desert, with its exposed lumpy ocean floor, offers a wonderful metaphor, wonderful encouragement, for writing. You know the old story of the nomad on a quest for an oasis? Is what is out there a mirage? What’s reality?

*When you were painting, did you find that elements of that endeavor had companions in your work as a poet?*

Absolutely. It served as ballast to my tendency to perceive of the world as super-amped. That is, things could be as simple as the blue table, the red hat, the green chair. The world gets complicated soon enough by language. My poetry gets complicated very quickly. I think in associative ways and expressionistic ways, so before I know it, I’m off and running. This reminds me of that—reminds me of that. But having to portray the world in color was a kind of relief. A way to keep a place simple. Spare. But I gave up painting because, in fact, the world does need to be represented in its layers, in its thickness, and I wasn’t able to
achieve that in oil. Still, I'm grateful for what, in many ways, was an idyllic time.

*You’ve been in Arizona since the late 1980s. Is it a tough place to live, given the rocky and somewhat inhospitable landscape?*

Certainly there are a lot of snakes, and I'm very cautious about them. I had a recent encounter with one while I was recycling my trash, and it was a formidable experience. My blood drained out and ran into my shoes!

And the landscape is formidable because of what you can and can't touch. If you're used to lying down in the grass or feeling the sweet leaves of the almond tree—forget about it. It's not a very welcoming landscape.

*Do you feel any responsibility or obligation to capture anything about this place where you live?*

I feel a heavy responsibility. I don't know if “capture” is the right word though. I'm not an environmentalist or a scientist; there's a lot I don't understand. But I spent some years researching the efforts to create the bomb out in New Mexico, when I was writing a book that worked that theme a bit. Driving around the remote Southwest can no longer be a naive experience of strange beauty—it turns out that the ground underneath is ticking. Toxins have been leaking into the earth for sixty-odd years. I became obsessed with nuclear waste material and its effect on the landscape here, not to mention the human population. So I spent some time getting involved in politics in that way. I was outspoken without being terribly knowledgeable. And then I realized that it wasn't really my job; I wasn't trained. However, I was thinking about what evil is, and the question has stayed in my work at the metaphoric level. Poets have vivid imaginations and can imagine the very worst of what must be going on.

I would describe myself as a writer who is forced into the real world every day. And I think we absolutely have an obligation not only to describe what we see but also to rail against any further deception. It's just not enough to say, “Things are a mess.” We have to prevent them from getting worse. That's a challenge. And I don't have a blueprint for how to do that. But, as a teacher, I feel that I have to participate in a conversation about the responsibilities of the poet to the world. It's not about the sounds of the words we use, even as they echo sounds in nature. It's not about recreating pictures “of a lost world.” That's only the beginning.
#15, from *A Palace of Pearls*

What is it about Americans  
we bully the first people we meet  
whole villages of Pima Indians  
moved into saguaro forests every June  
with long picking sticks they poke the green fruit they scoop out the  
pulp  
and toss the star-shaped rind down to inspire rain  
the innards ripen to iodine-red centers and tiny black seeds  
they’re made into syrup and jam and pressed into cakes for later  
should they need to be shared with manbeasts like us  
our prophecy has been written by Shakespeare  
“you’ll be rotten ere you be half ripe”  
the long picking sticks are made by tying their ribs together  
WHEN THE SOFT FLESH FALLS OFF THE FALLEN GIANTS  

—Jane Miller