Poets On Place

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New Year

The days have become weeks, and the weeks have counted off the months. It seems that yesterday we lived in suburban madness, commuting hours a day to satisfying but exhausting careers.

Then the trip. And it’s as if the old world, the old ways never existed.

It is 4:45 a.m. as I write this. New Year’s Day. We have crossed over from one year to the next. When the sun went down last night, we cooked dinner, popped a bottle of champagne we’ve been carrying around for months, and then—under only the light of the half moon—we scoured the sky with our binoculars. Stars upon stars. Countless dots of light, light hurtling at us—like the light of the North Star—sent this direction hundreds of thousands of years ago. And then, like old people all over, no matter the home or location, we turned in early, long before the big ball dropped in NYC or anywhere else. At midnight we were asleep as one year clicked into the other.

I woke up very early, and I began to think about the journey and what it means. Towns, places, and the highways that connect them. Always lurking is “What’s next?”

This trip is full of things that are named and unnamed. I’m writing a book, trying to figure out if I want to keep teaching. My wife is deciding what’s next for her, a business, back to her career, something else we don’t even know.

Loose ends. The money is disappearing. It’s not an endless supply, I can tell you. I have the small white bank receipts to prove to you that the time is dwindling. But we wouldn’t go back now. We’re something like halfway. Half the poets. Half the miles. Half the country. We wouldn’t turn back for anything. It’s a road that we chose and one we’re going to hurtle down until we finish the journey. When the interviews are over in a few months, I suspect the sadness will be real and overwhelming. The real world will intrude like never before. But there’s time still. Time still to continue the dream.

Just now, the light is appearing in the east, over a hill whose name I do not know. My wife sleeps. I leave Winnie Cooper for a bit. The desert is always cold in the morning, but I stand out there for a while anyway. The only sound—I mean the only sound—is the rush of blood in my temples, the sound of my breath. The sound of a new world coming on.
To get to Lubbock, we have to go north and east out of Arizona and through New Mexico. We charge headlong into the panhandle of Texas, my favorite part of my favorite state. We’re ahead of schedule, so we spend the day north in Amarillo. We eat gigantic slabs of beef, walk under a swirling, changeable sky, then take a ride out of Amarillo to Cadillac Ranch.

Long one of the best and most wondrous nutty roadside attractions, Cadillac Ranch sits benignly but queerly alongside the interstate between Amarillo and points west. Ten vintage Cadillacs are lined up, their front ends lodged in the earth, the back half of each car rising up at about eleven o’clock. They are heavily laden with psychedelic, swirling colors and graffiti: “Jeremiah,” “Kelly,” “Jared W. age 8 was here for the first time 2004.”

When we get down to Lubbock, we find something just as odd: Bill Wenthe—a kid from Jersey—happily stuck halfway into the ground of this hardscrabble windy city. Although Lubbock was a sort of geographical shock for him, he’s adapted beautifully. He tells me about a visit from one of his New York pals a few years ago. As they drove a highway north of the city, Wenthe was reveling in the texture and variety of grasses, the birds on fenceposts, the railroad track, the various structures along the road, the sky, and what the sky was telling him. His pal said, “Boy, there’s nothing out here.”

It was then that Wenthe knew he’d crossed a threshold. The geographic shock was over. The landscape had taught Wenthe what to see and how to see it, and suddenly Lubbock was home.

After a childhood in New Jersey and before coming to Texas, you lived for a long time in rural Virginia. Was that a culture shock of some kind?

It was a very welcome move, but not so much a difference of culture as of geography. I was living in Manhattan, in the East Village, before I went to Virginia; and I’d go backpacking in the Blue Ridge Mountains. On one of these trips I stopped at the University of Virginia in that quiet period between graduation and before summer school, when the campus is really quiet. Walking in these gardens that Jefferson had designed, one could get this kind of eighteenth-century feel, and I remember thinking that this would be a nice to place to come and study. Virginia
was the first place I ever lived where I really felt like I understood the place in terms of natural and human history.

When I moved to Virginia, I found a landscape that was just stunningly beautiful. Rolling hills, woods, and farms, mostly pleasure farms, that often looked very picturesque, like English farms. And nearby, there were national forests and wilderness.

For three years in that time I lived in a structure that, to call it a cottage would be to ennoble it. To call it a shack might be to disparage it a bit too much. It was an old barracks structure from World War II that someone had towed out into the woods. I heated it with wood that I cut from fallen trees. I lived on 500 acres of woods that had been in my landlord’s family since colonial times—it was granted to them by the King of England.

There was a slave cemetery on this land, hidden and overgrown in the woods. Just adjacent to the land was a ruined antebellum mansion. There was an antebellum house that was still lived in by a very old woman that was featured in the poem “Enniscorthy, Virginia,” in my first book. There was also a walled, well-kept cemetery that held ancestors of my landlord and other families. One of the things you’d notice were the gravestones of men who were born in the 1840s and who died in 1863 or 1864, presumably in the Civil War.

So there were all these layers that I could see of American history. And layers of society: the rural people who lived there who didn’t have a lot of money, the families of old money who’d owned the land for a long time, and then the new incoming money.

At the same time I had a very intimate sense of the immediate woodland surroundings. I had a sense of time that was measured by the cycles of insects, wildflowers, birds, and the growth on the trees around me.

*What was it like for you when you came to Lubbock?*

Having lived the first thirty-five years of my life on the East Coast, I was nervous about moving so far away. In fact, I swear, when people would ask me where I want to teach, I’d say, “Anywhere but Texas.” It was a joke, and all I meant was that I didn’t want to move to a flat, dry place. So, of course, I ended up getting a job in one of the driest, and certainly the flattest, places in the state.

My first reaction was, again, a kind of geographic shock. I wouldn’t call it culture shock. Because in many ways this is a very accommodating town, a very friendly town. A very interesting town with its own kind of creativity and diversity. The overall climate, culturally and politically, tends to be conservative—and I’m not—but no more so than Virginia or much of New Jersey.

What continually amazes me about Lubbock is the birds here. This neighborhood I’m in kind of looks like the suburb where I grew up in
New Jersey. Of course, there’s no major metropolis, but the impression is suburban. And yet, there are so many kinds of birds that I can see from my backyard or in the park down the street. Dozens of varieties of raptors, waterfowl, wading birds—bizarre things, like pelicans even. And that doesn’t even include the songbirds.

*As a bit of an adopted Texan, do you feel any responsibility or interest in capturing something of Texas?*

I’m finishing my twelfth year here. My sense of responsibility comes, first of all, in realizing that I’m not a Texan. Texas is a place that many people are deeply attached to, whose ancestors are buried here, and whose lives were shaped here. I know I can’t simply move here and call myself a Texan.

I look with some envy at that strong identification with a place, which is something I don’t quite have. I can observe that identity, but I can’t write from inside that identity. I want to present the place where I live in its complexity. There’s a poem in my second book called “White Settlement,” which takes its title from a local historical marker that notes—without actually mentioning the cruelty, the massacre—the defeat of Indian tribes in this area. The marker’s inscription ends with the phrase, “thereby opening western Texas to white settlement.” The speaker of this poem, like me, is a newcomer trying to make sense of where he lives. He considers the violence behind the euphemistic word “settlement” and the layers of human occupation, from earliest hunter-gatherers from twelve thousand years ago to the later Plains Indians, to the Cavalry and the white settlers, and the contemporary overlaying of asphalt, which seems to wipe out, like a kind of amnesia, these layers of human occupation. That’s a poem where I really try to grapple with the history, a history that is only mine in the last twelve years.

*When you use place in a poem, what are you trying to accomplish?*

The way I usually work to create a sense of place, or to ground a poem, is that I talk about places in relative ways, types of places. I might speak of our street or backyard, or I’ll talk about a park. Or I might talk about a trout stream. But then I’ll try to present that place in such a way that you can see it in time, in a particular and dramatic way. I’ll try to make the poetic experience of that place specific, whether it’s a direct physical experience of a place or a memory of a place. I want to describe it in such a way that it’s being experienced at that time, and not just as some file photo I’m pulling out. I think I’m always trying to arrive at a sense of place, with emphasis on the sense—to discover where you are and how it is that you’re there at this particular moment. Ultimately it’s about intensifying the experience of being alive and human, which is what all poetry, or all poetry that I could care about, tries to do.
Alien

They can be found, we’ve been told, west of Roswell; some who claim to have seen them, even caught them. The idea of them teased us until we made contact with a rancher on whose land they’ve been reported, and we set out to investigate ourselves. Route 380 led through downtown Roswell, where the silly and the earnest keep each other honest—Alien Souvenirs on one side of the street, UFO Research Center on the other.

Later, ranch roads gave out in rock, ocotillo, straggling juniper, a land strange to think would be hospitable to what lives, naturally, so far away. We made our preparations—polarized glasses, special boots and vests, the graphite rods—then hiked to the creek where we worked apart, probing every rock, undercut, and downed log, every fluid seam where current slips past stiller water.
When Loren gave a shout, I ran—and when I had reached him, he held it for me to see. There it was, undeniable; still this proof was not exactly what I would call knowledge; it only confirmed a sense of something other. And yet this being at the edge of our being is all we had come for.

We caught several more: greenish above, waxing to yellow underneath, scarlet gills and gelled, lidless eyes—though I cannot really describe them, or even see them clearly for the coat of clear slime that made them shimmer, and shift, reflecting back at me.

It was night when we returned to the truck. A sky trout-spotted with stars; the lateral line of our galaxy shining—that stream still moving, as the astronomers tell us, always away.

—William Wenthe
Naomi Shihab Nye
San Antonio, Texas

Nye lives in a beautiful 100-year-old house in the fabled King William district in downtown San Antonio. The neighborhood—which boomed originally in the middle of the nineteenth century—is an eclectic collection of two-story houses painted in festive and funky colors. Right across the street is an empty park, and I stand there and look across at it for a while before going in.

We go through the house to a back room that looks out over the backyard and garden. Nye gets me iced tea and a tray of nuts and candy. She shows me some pages from a new anthology she’s put together, one that pairs poems and paintings from Texas writers and artists. It’s large, colorful, and rich inside with many folks that Nye has known after a quarter century in the state.

As we sit and nibble, she tells me about a five-day trip through Louisiana that she took with her husband and son in the waning days of 1999. They took turns being in charge of all the events of a single day. The trip they called a “meander.” On one day they all went and sat in a field, sketching. On another, they knocked on a small-town mayor’s door to ask some questions. “We sat with the mayor; he ended up giving our son the key to the city.”

She tells me about the last day of that trip, indeed the last day of 1999. They were driving toward Homa, Louisiana, where they would stay that night. A train was crossing the track in front of them after sundown. It pulled a number of odd-looking flatbed trailers, and they couldn’t tell at first what was being carried on them. “We realized that these were tombstones on the train,” she said. “It hit me that we had left the century in which we were born, and we were entering the century in which we will die.”

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What sort of role do you think place plays in your own work?

I think place is really the gravity for poetry. Poetry exists in terms of how it springs out of the earth that you’re in, the earth of your memory, and the gravity it gives you, the compass, how it holds us together and keeps us linked to what we need. I read poems out loud every day to wake our son up—been doing that for years.

There’s a sense of deeper connection and belonging when we hear poems read aloud, because they give us the sense we’re back on the
true earth, not restless and not preoccupied or lost in empty language. Engagement with a poem is greatly helped by hearing it and saying it.

So, the places of my own life become that earth. But I feel at home very easily in places. I don’t have the sort of dislocation feeling that many people have who travel a lot. I feel at home in about two hours when I get somewhere. And I like that nomadic switcheroo in the psyche. But I also like being on my own humble earth, in our little hundred-year-old cottage near the San Antonio River and the way the light comes in.

I think about place obsessively, maybe because part of my own family was made refugees by the state of Israel in 1948. I carry their sense of exile. Many of my cousins, who live in Texas now, and my dad, of course, really bear a profound ache of exile as Palestinian refugees. I think my awareness of displacement and diaspora has marked a certain way that I think about place. We’re very lucky if we have a little piece of ground, house, or an apartment that we can feel secure about. This is a great American luxury; we might wish it were a universal human right. I have known so many in my life who have always been in flux and who have had so many things taken away from them that I don’t have the delusions that many Americans have. “This is mine and I’m keeping it!” I’m haunted by what a luxury this “simple basic right” would be for so many people in our world.

Last year we were renovating two rooms in this ancient house and living in a hotel for thirty-four days down the street, because we had no water at home. During that time I was reading the news as Texas suffered terrible flooding and houses were washed downstream. I was also reading about Palestinians having their houses crushed by bulldozers, a popular Israeli hobby. So at the same time as we worked on two little rooms, our labors seemed so pathetic, like an embellishment.

Why am I working so hard picking out tile when I should just be grateful to have a roof?

Poetry helps us acknowledge and notice our own places with more care.

What does San Antonio smell like? Jasmine adrift. Honeysuckle, mountain laurel. When we have houseguests, they say, “My God! Your birds are so loud!” Or, “Oh, those trains at 2:00 a.m. How do you sleep?” After all these years they have become our lullabies.

In poetry we have detailed, interested, reverent engagement with our surroundings.

Do you feel any kind of obligation to write about the places of your life?

Definitely, but I don’t know if obligation is the right word. Someone asked me recently if I felt “recruited” to speak up for Palestinians, and I said, “I don’t know if I’ve been recruited. Maybe I’m recruiting myself.” There’s a sorrowful cause, so many people in a bad situation, and the
turmoil and sorrow remain unresolved, so I feel that it’s a part of my calling to speak up about it—although we all must speak about many things. Iraq, now. So, so many places.

I’ve heard Robert Bly talk about how we continue to return to the trees of our childhood, the land of our childhood, our first spot on the earth, all of our lives. That’s true, but I think other later places can overtake that place in our metaphorical realm and our deep-heart thinking and seeing. I know I think more about San Antonio as a physical place, or even Jerusalem because it’s a struggling place, more than St. Louis (where she was born), which will always have a childhood-wistful air for me.

We’re always looking at place, always thinking about it and wanting to convey something of what it is. I love when I can read a poem by Mary Oliver, say, and feel completely wrapped up in Cape Cod. A poem will transport us to another whole sensibility of air and earth.

Arabs have a phrase, which I’ve always loved, that my father used a lot when I was young. We have a duty to go outside and smell the air. Some evenings, we’d all be in the living room, and he’d say, “Let’s go outside and smell the air.” Other kids used to say, “What’s in the air? Is something burning?” But it just meant being part of the evening, feeling the light, seeing the sunset and sky, smelling the earth. And it is very, very important. It’s still the one thing I do when I first get to any town—take a walk and smell it.

I do think we live in a particularly disembodied time, and I’m concerned about kids growing up—and I have one—who don’t have a strong allegiance to what makes a place distinct, the soulful elements that we should try to protect.

About two months ago my husband and son were out of town. I had been working all day, and I was going out with some friends, and there was about an hour in between all that. I went and sat on our front porch step with a perfect view of the sunset, the buildings, and trees. One of my neighbors passed by and said, “Are you all right?” And I said, “What do you mean?” And she said, “Well, the way you’re sitting there like that, I thought maybe you were locked out.” And I thought that’s so weird. What is a porch, if not for sitting on? But then I thought, when was the last time I just sat there, with a little glass of rum and lime, staring at the sky? It’s my job.
Sitting on one’s porch step is a lost art. I think that poetry calls to us—by its very nature, by the kind of consciousness it requires or invites—not to believe in the word “busy,” not to apply it to ourselves. Poetry calls to us to *(banging on table)* sit on the step.
Pause

The boy needed
to stop by the road.
What pleasure to let
the engine quit droning
inside the long heat,
to feel where they were.
Sometimes
she was struck by this
as if a plank had slapped
the back of her head.

They were thirsty
as grasses
leaning sideways
in the ditch,
Big Bluestem
and Little Barley,
Texas Cupgrass,
Hairy Crabgrass,
Green Sprangletop.
She could stop at a store
selling only grass names
and be happy.

They would pause
and the pause
seep into them,
fence post,
twisted wire,
brick chimney
without its house,
pollen taking flight
toward the cities.
Something would gather
back into place.
Take the word “home"
for example,
often considered
to have an address.
How it could sweep across you
miles beyond the last
neat packages of ice
and nothing be wider
than its pulse.
Out here,
everywhere,
the boy looking away from her
across the fields.

—Naomi Shihab Nye
Peter Cooley
Jefferson, Louisiana

Peter Cooley’s house has a purple door. It’s a rich and powerful hue, and we see it from well down the street as we negotiate the narrow passage. We’re in Jefferson, just minutes west of New Orleans proper. Winnie Cooper is north of the city in Slidell, Louisiana, and we’ve taken a rental car to spend a night and a day in New Orleans, a city with brilliant but narrow city streets.

When the purple door opens, I’m welcomed in by Peter and his wife—and the delicious smell of a chicken cooking.

Peter and I sit in the living room, and I arrange the gear. As always, my small digital camera sits on a tripod off to the side, where it will work on its own, shooting images once every ten seconds or so. I get out my indestructible minicassette recorder and place it somewhere vaguely pointed at Peter. (At this point, all of my gear is dented in some way, as I’ve dropped everything from a variety of heights getting into and out of poets’ homes and offices.)

The purple door that led us here comes up during the interview because Peter wants to talk about the rare quality of light that exists in New Orleans. He’s always had a debt to light in his work, but he really became aware of it during the research and writing of his celebrated volume, The Van Gogh Notebook. This part of Louisiana has just the right climate and humidity to give colors their due. The reds have a rich redness, the purples really pop. I wouldn’t believe it if it weren’t for the door that I look at more than once during my visit.

Cooley’s work is not a natural or obvious fit for a book about “place,” but I’ve long since learned to look past the obvious things. Peter’s landscape is internal, questing. The speaker in many of his works is caught inside a frame of his own design, looking out, peering out, wondering if indeed there is a way out. It’s heady stuff—and rich in place in ways that don’t require the occasional name of a town or street or roadside bar.

What kind of role have the places of your life played in your poetry?

I’m very interested in place as a reflection of the inner self. But you can’t have the inner place without the outer. The outer has to be expressed through the inner; that’s how poetry works. We can’t understand each
other without images. So we have to imagize the internality, and place is—finally—extension of the imaging.

So this place—because I’ve lived here for twenty-eight years—has a lot to do with me now, but not in any obvious ways. There’s a poet I won’t name who has written a lot of poems with street names from the Quarter. I can’t stand that kind of thing. I hate this “Now I’m on Frenchman Street. Now I’m on Decatur Street” kind of poetry. That’s just local color, and local color is the most transient form of literature.

But I didn’t set out to be in a certain place at all. I’m a southerner by adoption, and that old-line southerner thing is very important to many people. You have to be from here, and your granddaddy has to be from here, too.

*Jefferson seems like a quirky little multi-use sort of place. What is it like to live on this nice residential street with an industrial area looming?*

We’ve lived out here in this little no-man’s-land since 1978. We moved here simply because we could afford to live here. But it has become a part of my poetry. This is a very quiet residential area. Originally, a lot of very old people lived here, but now young people have moved in as the old people died out. But it’s right off Jefferson Highway, and we have some of the New Orleans weirdos wandering up and down the highway, and they have figured in my poems as the “lost” of New Orleans. And I think we have a larger proportion of lost people here for a number of reasons. It’s easy to be lost here. You can live on the street. There’s the whole party culture. The laissez-faire culture takes in a lot of different people, and anyone might be included.

*Do you think poets have any obligation to write about these places where we live and work?*

It’s going to happen anyway. Do poets have any obligation to use images? It’s going to happen anyway. Do poets have any obligation to be musical? It’s all just inevitable. I determined I wouldn’t write about New Orleans, but I ended up doing it anyway. I’ve always had this field of opposition in myself; if I said I wouldn’t do something, I’d end up doing it.

I think the reason I have this antagonism about writing about this place is because it’s a tourist town. When we think of New Orleans, the first thing we think of is tourists and a lot of very trite images. They’re commercial, and I’m not interested in using commercial images, the images of Mardi Gras.

I’m much more interested in the place inside and in the place outside and the place I make, which is a mediation between those two realities. And the place I make is myself—the person I’m carrying around—and the poem. They’re both made-up entities.
Your work is quite spiritual, lyrical. Are there natural world elements in your work that do double duty?

The light. The light is trying to keep the inner light lit, the spiritual light. And I can only keep the spiritual light lit by a relationship with a God who is inside myself and outside myself. This light in reality keeps that light lit. And the light in New Orleans is very important to me. I think it’s a very special light. I wrote these poems about Van Gogh. When I was studying him in the late 1980s, I discovered that the light in a lot of his paintings had to do with the humidity in the south of France. In densely humid places, the hues of colors are more intense—red is redder, blue is bluer, and so on. And then I discovered that there was a great similarity between that climate and a New Orleans climate. The French poets saw those percepts of external reality as being part of the spiritual condition, as Rimbaud did. Red is a spiritual red. I can’t say it equals “blah blah blah,” but it’s all part of a spiritual landscape that I’m trying to create in my poems. So it’s inner and outer, and the light is the connection.

There’s a really claustrophobic sense in some of your poems. At times for me I feel like I’m closed in with the speaker, trapped inside that moment. What are you doing with that?

I don’t have any sense of open space. Most of my poems deal with room, and one of the typical situations in my poems is a speaker being in a room and being confined there. Now that’s a room of his own soul. How can he mediate the distance between his room and the outside world? As I said earlier, the light is the mediating source between those two things, and the light is a spirit in itself. The light carries him out and carries the world in so he can get out. I think my work is constantly bringing the world in. In my final poem the wall between inner and outer would come down, and the room would be all light.
Miller Williams
Fayetteville, Arkansas

From New Orleans we head toward Arkansas. We get to poke along through countless little towns in Louisiana and Mississippi as we take a leisurely path north. We’ve got two goals: (1) to visit with the venerable and much beloved poet Miller Williams, absolutely the first poet I thought of when I was planning this trip, and (2) to see our house and the disastrous array of furniture and boxes that fill it.

Were we to begin work on the American poetry version of Mount Rushmore, I’d like to volunteer to start work on the chunk that would become Miller’s face. It’s a miraculous face, one that is wise and welcoming, genteel and grizzled, open, inquisitive, and always alive.

Miller’s home—a virtual treasure trove, museum, and love letter to his family, his countless friends, and his work—makes a splendid place to meet. We repair to an airy porch off the side of the house, where the sound of a burbling fountain eases into the infrequent gaps of our conversation.

We talk about Miller’s southern past, a biography of travel, civil-rights protests, music, family, and love that pour out in his lifetime of work. He recalls for me some of the stories behind his poems, turning pages in a collection, running his finger along lines, sometimes—surprisingly—reading with a sure and soothing rhythm.

We spend some time in his study, where the photos of his friends and family peer down on him as he works his way through yellow legal pads of new work. (He fills these pads, sometimes an entire one to create a single piece.) While we get acquainted, he sits in his writing chair and points out U.S. presidents, musicians, poets, and pals on the walls. He points out his family: the ones ahead of him, the ones behind. It’s a small room, but comfortable, and it buzzes with the lives that his work has touched.

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When I first raised the question to you about place in your poetry, what places did you think of right away?

I thought of not a very well-defined or local place. I thought of the South. I think of myself as a southerner before I think of myself as an American. It’s a matter of personality and character and lifestyle, and it has nothing to do with conservatism or racism. My father was
a Methodist preacher, who was a socialist, union organizer, active integrationist, and feminist. And first of all, a southerner.

And he felt, as I feel, that a southerner has a slower lifestyle, which is valuable to us, certainly to me, and a sense of irony that is not always found in the rest of the nation.

I worked in New York in the 1950s, and I began to feel that I was surrounded by bricks, where I had grown up surrounded by stones. I simply like the texture of the South. And especially in the South, I want to live in the hills. I published an essay titled “Hill Folks and Flatlanders.” There’s a real difference in the way the world is seen by people, like my wife, who grew up in a delta, and myself, who grew up in the hills. I’m not only a southerner, but I am a hill man.

I asked my wife, “What is the place in my poetry?” and she said “It just smells southern all the way through. Do you realize how many southern towns you have in your poetry?” She realized it, and I didn’t. These yellow tabs (showing me a copy of his collected work—Some Jazz a While—with more than a score of yellow slips sticking out of the pages) all indicate poems that happened in the South.

Some of the poets I’ve talked to identify themselves quite strongly as regional poets, poets from an area or a state. You’ve already identified yourself as a southern poet. Do you think that’s big enough; does that cover enough territory?

I think that the subjects of my poems answer that in the affirmative. Because I have written about everything from creation to the possibility that dogs might have souls, to the meaning of evolution. I don’t think there is any subject that is not available to me just because I like the tonality of the South. You can deal with any subject with any tone. I was called by one critic the Hank Williams of American poetry. And what it meant was that I use ordinary language that is accessible to squirrel hunters and taxi drivers. And that’s important to me. But it doesn’t limit the subject; it simply limits the approach to it.

My poetry is as colored by my scientific background as it is by the fact that I’m a southerner. I can think of a new poem that bears that out. In “An Answer to a Young Woman Who Said That She Never Had Any Luck,” I went back in the poem and showed this young woman how in following her genetic train back, that every time a sperm met an egg, that there had been a hole left for her. Generation after generation. So that somebody who is nobody but her could be born when she was born, just at that moment when that sperm got that egg. Now if that’s not luck, there is no luck. But without my scientific background I couldn’t have explained that to her in the poem.
There’s a poem of yours called “Rock” that seems to me to be especially vivid, certainly one that couldn’t have been written without your keen attention to the place that’s described in the poem.

The poem is about what we do with our lives, the pursuit of our lives, the goals of our lives, and finally, they are simply something to keep our attention. It was here in this front yard where we did it. The rock is metaphorical, of course. We all have rocks in our lives that we have to move. But finally, the rock is simply an obsession, as Sisyphus had an obsession. We are not going to be here forever, and you have to understand that here, unlike forever, it’s six o’clock. Forget it, man, cool it. Leave your obsession alone. Your career is not the most important thing on earth. But finally, it’s just a rock you’re trying to move. In the poem I say, “Every two hours, I’ve earned a beer.” It’s a metaphor for what we dedicate our lives to. Finally, just go in the house, and let your wife give you a mug of beer.