Poets On Place

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The weather is freezing, and we’ve gone as far north and east as we are able. Time is crushing us, and we have to get back to the middle of the country for a western route that will take us all the way to Utah on the last leg of the trip. We start across Pennsylvania in one shot, stopping once to get gas and once to make the latest in an inexhaustible supply of sandwiches. Later, I find myself spent, but still pushing along the Pennsylvania Turnpike at 11:30 at night. My wife has given out and is asleep, beautifully, in the passenger seat.

Somewhere just outside of Harrisburg, we start climbing. Endless switchbacks. There’s a three-quarter moon, yellow to orange, right ahead of me; and the traffic is light.

The switchbacks continue, and the climb is steady. Somehow—and this is not normal—Winnie Cooper is running like a small sedan. The accelerator is responsive; its nimbleness amazes me.

A Harley-Davidson, its distinctive rat-a-tat-tat sound coming first, passes me. The guy has a black helmet with “Tommy” stenciled on the back. He begins to pull away, but I give it some gas and follow along behind him. We’re doing 60 mph for the first couple of miles. We occasionally come behind two or three semis struggling up the hills. I keep thinking that we’ll level off, hit a valley, something, but the incline is steady.

Eighty miles from Pittsburgh I notice I’m up to 70 mph. The pavement is glassy smooth, and the moon gives a little light. But it’s still a highway near midnight, so it’s dark everywhere else. We bend left and right, up the switchbacks. I keep thinking, “What the hell is the elevation here? How high are we going?”

Two semis have to weave from the slow lane in front of me. Tommy, the bike guy, is still ahead. The slow lane has narrowed because of construction barriers. The semis are in front of me; I ease off the gas and watch my speedometer start to fall. This is more normal. Winnie is brave, has a V-10, but rarely goes north of 50 mph on hills like these.

Off to the right, up another climb, I see Tommy’s taillight as he pulls away. I tap my steering wheel awhile, and I take a drink of water out of a bottle next to me. It takes about five miles for me to pass the semis; but when the road flattens temporarily, I really get rolling. I hit 75 mph, and the road is empty.
I have my window open, and the wind is rushing through here like I’m on a roller coaster. I see Tommy’s light ahead of me. In a few minutes I’m behind him, and we settle in together. We bank the long, slow corners, he a second ahead of me or so, and we use both lanes—the left lane for bends that way and the right lane when we cut back.

He’s aware of me—he couldn’t not be—but he senses I’m not passing. We climb higher and impossibly higher. As we pass about the fifty-mile mark, we haven’t seen another car in five minutes. I look down once and blink. My speedometer says 80 mph, and the sound of both engines is nearly deafening, the echoes slapping back from the rocks that crowd both sides of the turnpike.

Higher still. Impossible, I think. The moon hangs ahead of us, the only light save our own, and we’re headed up another switchback when I hear Tommy’s engine misfire a time or two. Altitude. The gas mixture on the big bike is off a hair, not noticeable anywhere else but here.

He drops to seventy, and I stay behind him. When two semis appear ahead of us on the right, Tommy pulls into the slow lane and points an index finger, motioning me to go on ahead. He eases his throttle back as he nears what appears to be a level spot of highway.

I go past, not waving, not looking, just pushing on. I eat up the two semis and am now on a giant sloping downhill. In a dream of some kind, I see the speedometer flicker back and forth on either side of 85 mph. The hum of the engine and the roar of the wind are exhilarating. It’s the best I’ve felt about anything in a year, maybe five years. That’s a horrible and sad thing to say, and my life is full of incredible blessings. But tonight is extraordinary. It’s one of the best nights of my life. I love driving, I guess. Highways. I love the feeling of going somewhere. There are few things as beautiful as the rushing of the wheels.

My love of place, of new places, has to have a genesis. There has to be a reason why a night like this brings me such happiness. My folks worked for a long time in the hotel industry, and we would move every few years. About the time I’d find a friend in one town, we’d move on to the next. I learned not to put posters up on the walls of my bedrooms or to get too attached to my teachers. And as I got older and left for college, I realized that I never gave a shit about any place that was called home. That’s twenty-five years ago, and I’m still moving, still running. I’m going someplace else. Anyplace. Anywhere.

And suddenly, there’s Tommy again. I can see his single headlight coming up. We’re on a flat when he pulls even with me. We’re more than an hour into this event. I can see the lights of Pittsburgh in the distance; and though part of me wants to keep pushing along under this moon, I’m tired, sleepy, and ready for rest.

I think about Tommy. He looks to be my age or a bit older. On a Sunday night like this, I think he is going home, home to someplace
where someone is waiting for him. I look over at my wife; her name is Beth. Beth since I was nineteen years old and Beth for all of my life. I would drive to the end of the world if I knew she were waiting.

It’s one in the morning. Another day and another place.

Just before an exit, Tommy goes by, the Harley pouring through the night like sand.

I pull into the parking lot of a giant Wal-Mart that is closed for the evening. As always, a handful of other motor homes are here, scattered loosely in the furthest regions of the parking lot. I pull in under a soft yellow light and wake my wife up. I don’t tell her anything but “We’re here. We’re stopping for the night.”
James Cummins
Cincinnati, Ohio

It’s our second trip into Ohio, but not this part of Ohio. As Nikki Giovanni pointed out to me, Cincinnati sits at the tip of Appalachia and is a southern city. Like Nashville and Louisville coming up, its geographic and cultural locations are inconsistent. We’re at roughly the same latitude as Denver or Kansas City, but this is as much the South as Memphis, Tennessee, or Jackson, Mississippi.

We’re here to see Jim Cummins. Cummins, in addition to teaching poetry and literature at the University of Cincinnati, is the curator of the Elliston Poetry Collection, housed in a quiet spot on the sixth floor of UC’s main library. The room is set up for readings, so we have a ton of chairs to choose from.

A lot of Jim’s work is really all about a psychological landscape. In fact, I’ve been eager to see how what he has to say about place will fit with the more traditional sense of that word.

But as soon as we begin to talk, it’s clear that his work is about place, maybe more internal, but driven and shaped by external, too. He talks about the writing of one of his books, Portrait in a Spoon, and about how the writing of that book took place in the basement of his house, late at night, after he’d read his daughter to sleep. He’d grope his way down into the shabby basement and “wrestle” the poetry to life. In a dirty town, in a small house, he found refuge in the basement, and the poems found their way to him.

Jim is an excellent host and mapmaker. While we’re talking, he scribbles some maps for us to follow later, one that will lead us to the giant brown Ohio River and one to the streets of his much beloved Hamilton Avenue neighborhood.

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How has living in Cincinnati impacted you and your work?
This place has impacted me completely. I’d like to live in a beautiful place; who wouldn’t? But I wouldn’t really; do you know what I mean? I went out to Iowa for graduate school. This was back in the early ’70s. Things were tight economically; I had very few publications. I had no chances for teaching jobs particularly, and I took this job.

I love teaching, but I remember the night I came back. I drove along River Road and looked at these buildings, these buildings I wanted to
escape. Because Cincinnati, on one level, is the city of the dead. Not only is it a very conservative city, but it's a city that people never get out of. I refer to it as a reverse Brigadoon; every hundred years someone gets out. *(Laughs.)*

So I knew that was what I was going to have to fight. I saw it for years. People would come here, and they'd die because they couldn't face the abyss. Because the abyss was themselves, and you have to fight it. So that night, driving along River Road in the middle of the night, looking at all the dead faces in those houses and I thought, “Holy shit, I was so happy in Iowa.”

This place was a place both to escape from, and also it was the repository of me, of what I was and did. It was cold and implacable. For me, Cincinnati was full of great, silent spaces, at the other side of which you could hear other people having fun. So when I came back here from Iowa, my heart just sank through to my feet. I was sick in my stomach for a whole year until I reacclimated. It's deadly here in certain ways, almost on a toxic level. But on the other hand, I'm grateful for lots of things that are here. My daughters. And a life that I'm grateful to have.

But this was going to be my home, and I had to fight through that level of it. It never stops, because it's not a lonely place, but it is a solitary one. People are solitary here. It's a German town; they have German ways. They lock up their houses at eight o'clock. They're behind their locked doors, in their little places, doing whatever they do. So that solitude sort of descends on you when you come to live here. It's been a very shaping factor.

Now, in my middle age, I have deep, deep affection for the city and the state. With my eyes open, though. I mean this place is not perfect, but it's that interaction between it and me, that fight that I've needed to maintain myself, the fight that shaped me.

Consequently, when you talk about how place shapes you, I think my poetry is about psychological landscapes. Even when I went to Europe for a year, I had to be in a neighborhood. I had to be someplace that is something vis-à-vis something else, the vantage point on someplace else. I like to travel, but I don't have the wanderlust. I really like to see the same people each day; I like to see them turn. I like to see us all grow old together. I like to see how life works, and I feel you see that best by staying in one place.

I finished high school here, I went to college here; and so, a lot of those powerful experiences are set in this space, along this river that I love—the Ohio—among these buildings, in this kind of solitudinous space. In my next book I want to give voice to exactly that, where I begin and where it begins and ends. This amazing place.

Before he died, Jim Wright came back here to read. He would never leave New York City because he thought of Ohio as the land of the dead.
But for every Ohio poet, there are three or four who have mattered, and Jim Wright is one.

Wright’s terror in this place and classification of this place as the land of the dead is something I’m completely in sympathy with. But I want to be the weed that grows out of that, because you’re dealt what you’re dealt. The demons that Wright couldn’t defeat here. But I have come, not to love this landscape, but to be part of it and have an edgy and strong relationship with it.
Spring Comes to Hamilton Avenue

In spring the pear trees blossom
on Hamilton Avenue
and for a week or two
the young black kids with nowhere to go
sell their dope to each other
under resplendence.

For a week or two
the “Blue Jay” is a bright eye,
and the old beaks who gather there
to sort neighborhood gossip
remember their own.

Ray is gone now, the self-proclaimed
“Mayor of Northside,”
but there are several Rays left
warming on benches
under the white and blowing trees;

and this morning, across the street,
Bill steps out from the clutter
of his hardware store,
tilts a red cup to his lips,
then smiles around
with a general benignity
under the white flowers.

So much pain in the world—
so brilliant its occasional release!
A bus moves by slowly,
an old woman at a wedding;
a girl stands up on her bike—
how I loathe the ones
who say we've fallen
from some glory;
how I loathe their god.

—James Cummins
Frederick Smock
Louisville, Kentucky

We leave urban Cincinnati behind and almost immediately find ourselves in lush and hilly Kentucky. We make our way to Louisville and snake through surprisingly narrow and crowded city streets to Frederick Smock’s home, a second-floor apartment in a house from the 1920s that sits just blocks south of Cave Hill Cemetery, a sweeping and gigantic mid-nineteenth-century graveyard where Smock’s grandparents rest.

Smock welcomes me into his writing room, a placid, Spartan, and perfect space. A tiny wooden desk sits in one corner next to a large wood-framed window (a dozen panes). In front of the desk is a rolling wooden chair with two overstuffed pillows. It’s the kind of chair one could sit at for a while. The small writing surface is lit by a nine-inch lamp. A few small volumes crowd one side; in the middle is a stack of stapled pages.

The adjoining right-hand wall has a single 48-inch-tall bookshelf. It’s full but not overfull. The back wall, facing the window, facing the desk, features a tiny end table and a big red futon.

The room is quiet and still, and the peaceful space has taken me in. Smock’s voice is even, and his motions are muted, tiny. He sips occasionally from a coffee cup. Sometimes his hands clasp. Before we chat, he takes me down a hallway to show me his studio. On one wall are about a dozen canvases (for a gallery show, his second ever). He admits freely he’s an amateur, but his passion for it is pretty clear. The canvases are all landscapes, each packed with color, most with heavy, dark skies, far-off buildings, the occasional tree in the foreground. They are like a dozen versions of one image, each slightly different. He’s working it out, placing and replacing the elements. I’d like to stick around and see the final canvas, where he gets everything where he wants it.

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There was a great piece in Louisville Magazine about you growing up in your grandmother’s house. You used to lie on the roof of the garage, overseeing the backyard, the alley, and all the life that teemed in that neighborhood. How has that place fed your work over the years?

That’s a big question, and the answer is “Lots of ways.” As I delve into it, one of the things it suggests to me is an awareness of surroundings and space. There are people who go through life just unaware of the rooms they live in, the buildings that surround them. I think that’s why
we have so much awful architecture in this country. People just don’t pay attention. But I’ve always been very alert to my surroundings, very aware of wanting my surroundings to reflect not only myself but to allow me to keep hold of part of my personality.

That house also, because it was a house of women—a mother, a grandmother, a great-aunt, and then all these widows and nuns—and they all took care of me. They helped create a sense of warmth about place.

*What is your relationship like with Kentucky?*

It used to be a love-hate relationship (*laughs*). Being a Kentucky native—a Louisville native—I lost a few years in college wanting to be a New York poet, thinking that’s where it was happening. Even though I had grown up reading Kentucky writers and had met Jessie Stuart on a number of occasions when he came into town—and loved him as a child. As I got a little older, I began to think that wasn’t cool. I wanted to be from anywhere but Kentucky. So that was not productive. Then I began to make my peace with it when I began to discover some other Kentucky poets, poets whose voices really were more like my own. I became friends with Richard Taylor, Wendell Berry, James Baker Hall, and some others, who through their books—and later through their friendships—sort of mentored me and let me know it was okay to be from this place. And now I love it.

*How does place work for you in your work? Does it provide context, foundation, metaphor?*

For me, it’s often a place to begin. There’s an exercise I do with my students where I ask them to draw a sort of blueprint of the house they grew up in and place a few things they remember around the house. And then, using those things, write a sentence about each of them, finally turning those sentences into a sort of poem of reminiscence. For me, the physical place—especially as it lives in memory—is an avenue into emotion and idea. It’s a doorway through which you can apprehend those other things. Without that, I think I’d find it a lot harder to find my way to emotion, epiphany, whatever it is that’s going to happen in a poem. The best poem is almost always the one that is unplanned. You’re fretful throughout, thinking, “This one’s going to crap out like they usually do.” (*Laughs.*) But then something wonderful and unexpected happens and part of the answer is place is an avenue to get to these other things.

*You edited American Voice for many years, a magazine that published a very diverse group of writers. Did you ever get the sense while you were putting that magazine together that you were really learning something about the places from where these writers come?*
Oh yes. I was very aware of Kentucky being a place away from the centers of publishing. To do an international literary anthology from Kentucky was kind of goofy. Sallie Bingham and I even marginalized ourselves at the beginning. We thought of calling our journal *The Other Voices*. We were at dinner one night in New York with Frank McShane, who taught at Columbia, and he said, “You ought to locate it more centrally; call it the *American Voice*, something like that.” And so we did. It was an obvious suggestion.

It was very important to be open to all of the writing that was going on around and not finding voice in the more mainstream press—regional voices, women, writers of color. These are people who were not being published as much as they are now. And we had some inspiration. When Thomas Jefferson was plotting out the new territories, he drew the new Greenwich meridian right through Louisville. It was going to be the Greenwich of the West. And Thomas Merton said Kentucky was the center of the universe. Of course, I think he had in mind the Bardstown area with the distilleries and the monasteries, because he liked his bourbon.

We were very aware of being a center in our own way, but a center that was away from what people *thought* of as the center. We always published Kentucky writers alongside those of national and international renown, so they would see their work side by side with people who had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. And think, “I do belong on this sphere.”
Heron

The blue heron has come to Franklin County. That is, to the topmost branches of a dead cypress beside a pond on my friend Richard Taylor’s farm. We hiked up there with the dogs the other day; even the blind dog came along. We clambered over slave walls, through high grass, to the top of the hill. The pond shone like the eye of a cathedral dome and we stood round it, almost touching the heavens. There the tree, her nest big as a sombrero. The valleys lay below us, checkered in greens, palisades of the Elkhorn rose up in the east, the skies led away to far blue horizons. Somewhere out there, heron was unfolding her long pale wings. We had it on good authority. The New York Times did an article on her, and the blind dog kept looking in the same direction.

—Frederick Smock
Mark Jarman
Nashville, Tennessee

In a torrential rain we make our way south through Kentucky toward Nashville, a clean and prosperous city full of arts, tourists, and—apparently—a lot of other motor homes. We set up Winnie Cooper in pitch darkness, while standing in a muddy bog at the extreme end of a gigantic RV park near the Grand Ole Opry. As lightning crackles overhead, we sleep fitfully and then awake early with the sounds of other travelers trying to extricate themselves from deep ruts we’ve all caused by parking willy-nilly on any flat spot we could find.

After extricating ourselves from our swampy overnight home, we drive in brilliant sunshine toward the southern suburbs and then find—at one end of a pretty and long tree-lined road—Mark Jarman’s house. It’s right out of the ’60s, split level, slanted roof, set way back on a large lot, surrounded by a wide variety of hardwood trees, a giant Y-shaped cherry right in front.

Jarman meets me at a big glass door and takes me in on the main floor. Light pours in from the back of the house, where I can see through to the backyard. It used to be horse pasture, he tells me. There are some houses back down there in the valley now, but you can just see their roofs. Jarman’s backyard is heavily wooded, filled with birds and bird feeders, a few stray tree limbs from the giants that were here on this wonderful spot long before the house.

Jarman sits with his back to a four-sided fireplace, and I sit opposite him at a big wooden dining table. I have a real sincere love for Jarman’s beautiful, nostalgic, and haunting poems. In person, he’s quiet, serene, getting over a cold, but focused and alert to my questions.

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You’ve lived in some vastly different spots. Do you think that the places of your life have had an impact on the poet you’ve become?

I think they’ve had a significant impact. I think of myself in some ways as a poet of place who’s been uprooted for the past twenty-five years, and yet I’ve lived longer in the mid-South than I’ve lived anywhere else. One of the reasons place has been important to me is that when I was very young, my father moved us from Southern California—my mother and father were Southern Californians, Angelenos from south central L.A.—and transplanted us to Scotland, where he served a little
church in a linoleum factory town on the Firth of Forth. The landscape couldn’t have been more different.

To go from Southern California, where spring and summer were the two seasons, to Scotland, a bleak, cold, damp other world—albeit starkly beautiful—where the language was different in many ways, where the culture was different, the daily life was different, was a shock. It gave me a strong sense of what it meant to be in one place or the other.

When we were finished living in Scotland, we came back to Southern California. That experience, too, was a kind of rupture because by the time I left Scotland I felt attached to it. So to come back to the United States to another strikingly different place also had a profound effect. I now have a sense that my poems often begin either on the shore of the North Sea or the Pacific.

Since living in the South over the last twenty-five years, I’ve become very attached to this terrain as well. I don’t feel like—I’m obviously not—a native, although I was born in eastern Kentucky. I have a book-length poem called *Iris*, and part one is set in western Kentucky, where I taught for a few years. It could be thought of as my love poem to this part of the South—the hills, hollows, red oaks, fields of corn and tobacco, hidden streams, and limestone outcroppings.

**Do you think of place as something that grounds a poem, or is it more complex than that?**

I think it’s a grounding influence. Is the poem going to have some literal reality to which it is attached? Or is it going to exist on a rarified plane of abstractions and floating signifiers? To me, Charles Wright is the great poet who exemplifies the answers to those questions. If he didn’t have his places—Italy, eastern Tennessee, Montana, the Blue Ridge—to anchor him, his poems would just float away. He needs them. And since he refuses to construct a narrative through his poems, he needs to have this other thing to hold them in place and also to make them available to a reader. Place is one of the anchors a poem needs; the other is either subject or narrative, in order to hang on to the world and not just exist in a sort of Platonic realm.

**You have a number of poems that feel really rooted in a sort of historical place, warmly nostalgic poems like one called “The Supremes.” Do you think of your past as a place to write about?**

When I think of that place, since I lived there in the ’60s, I can see its relation to many historical events. “The Supremes” is also about race. I have a poem called “Ground Swell,” in which I write about surfing with a boy who attended my church, who was killed in Vietnam, whose funeral my father performed. Remembering him in that place gave me an understanding of a larger world—you know that sense of the local
and the universal. All of the markers of the universal occur in a local place. That’s why I often return to that place, to reattach myself to history. Nevertheless, there is a vein of nostalgia that runs through my work; I can’t help it. It’s a feeling of homesickness. I’ve gotten over it a bit. It’s inevitable that you do. It puzzles me sometimes that I no longer have that yearning need to live there again, even though whenever I am in Southern California, I feel a connection to the place I have never felt in the South.

*Are there certain elements from the natural world that serve as triggers for your poetry?*

That’s a great question because I do have them. Seeing waves or wave formations, whether they’re actual waves out in the sea that I get to be among or that I remember, or wind passing through red oaks, rain passing through the hollow below our house. When I recognized how important they were to me, I began to make them a deliberate sign that would run through my poems. Then there are kinds of weather in this part of the world that will remind me of weather in other places. It’s so ephemeral and weird, but there are days here that seem like days in Southern California. If I get a smell of coal smoke—not wood smoke—that will take me back to that thin, acrid, otherworldly feeling of morning in Scotland. Those kinds of things.

Here, as you can see, I’ve got about sixty hardwood trees. And I have an ambivalent relationship with them. They’re wonderful, but they’re also an impending responsibility because they’re getting old. Every year one or two of them dies, sometimes rather dramatically, as in they fall over (*laughs*). Except for the time in Scotland, where the season was always dreary, gray, and holding, with a brief spring and briefer summer, seasonal change was not something I grew up with. Living in this part of the world, there are four distinct seasons—boy, they come on time. Vernal equinox, spring is here. Autumnal equinox, summer is over. Winter solstice, it’s time to be cold. My response to it is not a native response. I’m still a visitor to this place and observing it.
Nashville Moon

The moon is such a good thing to come back to,
Like the good dream in which a long lost friend
Returns from death and is once more your friend
And, though you have forgotten him, forgives you.
Of course, among the stars and before dawn,
The reason that the moon seems so alive,
When it is truly, deeply not alive,
Is moonlight, and the face that it puts on.

The moon sets at the dead end of our street,
Above a house where someone wrote a song,
Above graves where some people have been buried
Over a hundred years. Right down the street,
It shines like it belongs in an old song
That might wake people who have long been buried.

I laid it out, how A would beat its wings
And set off tidal forces against B,
Which with a spasm would repel toward C
The waves that D would organize in rings,
Letting them spread, until I tugged the strings
That pulled them all together perfectly.
And everything would end up beautifully.
That would be that. And that would settle things.

And then my friend, a kindly Rabelaisian,
Aware that I thought this was in the can,
Took a drag, a drink, shook earth with a cough,
And asked if I knew how to make God laugh.
Dazed by my brilliance, I didn’t get the question.
He paused for breath, then whispered, “Have a plan.”

—Mark Jarman
St. Louis is a city in all respects of the word. Big-time sports—the baseball stadium rises up suddenly right in the middle of the central business district—industry, commerce, tourism. The gleaming silver arch is visible for miles as you arrive. Billboards outside of town advertise—in nearly equal numbers—casinos and churches.

Parts of the city west of the big river reveal a diverse populace. Gentrified neighborhoods with coffee shops, bookstores, and cobbled walkways butt up against neighborhoods that look as though they didn’t survive the bust of the ’70s. You see empty storefronts, burned-out houses, empty, weed-strewn fields, and every kind of trash—from half a pool table to truck tires—discarded alongside streets with appealing names like Euclid and LaClede.

But even at its worst, it’s vibrant and bustling. Street vendors are set up for a big Saturday. I see people selling everything from flowers to barbecue. There’s one optimistic fellow sitting in a lawn chair selling—what appears to be—about a hundred bar stools.

At a local grocery store, people gather at the front doors, some going in with empty baskets, talking to friends coming out with full ones. A sort of bare and dismal park is livened up by twenty kids working one giant Chinese kite, two older teenagers watching, actually almost rolling on the grass laughing, as the kite veers out of control and lands on the sidewalk, string sawed off by a “Drug-Free, Gun-Free” metal sign.

Carl Phillips’s home hides on a gorgeous tree-lined street in the shadow of the 150-foot-high giant green dome of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis. The house dates to the turn of the last century, and its front is dominated by a giant magnolia tree. Inside, the house has high ceilings, hardwood floors—with occasional and surprising marble slab inlays. Carl’s study is on the second floor, full of light from giant bay windows that open into the backyard.

Carl and I sit in the front living room; he’s on the “dog’s” couch, I’m in a big chair. Max, the milder of the two dogs, is barking at me. Barking doesn’t cover it. As he barks, I can see the muscles in his legs and back tense. His mouth flies open, the teeth, nice and white and present. If Carl were not so calm, I’d imagine that I would just look like a great big doggie treat.
How has place impacted your poetry?

For me, maybe it's less a matter of place than of placelessness. I grew up on air force bases, moving around nearly every single year until I was in high school. Sometimes I think that's the reason I ended up being a writer: I could create a sort of world to carry around with me.

On one hand, I like to think of myself as being from Massachusetts. I went to high school there, and college, and taught there for a while. But as of this fall, I've been in St. Louis for ten years, and I realize I can't really choose, at this point, which place I call home—or I don't want to choose. I live on Cape Cod in the summer, and I find that's good for a certain amount of time, and then I really miss being in St. Louis again; and vice versa. Maybe it's been built into me not to be able to live in any one place permanently. As for how that affects the writing, it may be why the poems aren't about a particular place usually, but about questing within and beyond place, never being quite able to sit still, as if restiveness equals what it means to be alive.

So I think that's where place figures into the work. It might also explain why I write the way I write, the often sinuous syntax. I think it's a way of stalling, never quite staying in one place, stalling getting there—as soon as you arrive, you plummet off in another direction.

My poems changed a great deal once I moved to the Midwest. When my first book came out, the reviews described the work as urban poetry. I'm sure that getting together with my partner, Doug Macomber, had a big part in the work's changes. He's a landscape photographer; so when we came to the Midwest, we spent a lot of time going out to the countryside, just sort of tracking the light at sunset. Just staring for hours. In his case, staring and waiting for the right shot. In my case, well, wondering what to make of another field, another sky. That's how I came to love the Midwest. For a long while, I'd been constantly looking for the ocean, missing it. I needed to be away, in the very different landscape of the Midwest, to learn the difference between searching and seeing, in this case seeing those bits of the world in front of me. As a result, the poems are as likely now to feature a Midwest landscape as a marine one.

You talk about the midwestern landscape, but St. Louis is clearly a city. What is there about living in a city and this neighborhood in particular?

I love the diversity here, the racial diversity, the sexual diversity—that is, among other things, a decidedly gay-lesbian neighborhood, which means that it's also the neighborhood for the independent bookstore,
coffee shops, and a lot of art galleries. It also means that Doug and I are no longer the exotic couple that we were just a few miles across town, where we lived before—which is refreshing.

So it means a lot to me to be in a city and yet to have the small neighborhood feel that exists here as well.

It also seems fitting that I would live two doors down from the Basilica. Every day, every hour, you hear the bells up until the six o’clock culmination. Somehow I feel as if I’m living through the canonical hours with the clergy at some secular level. My big models, after all, are (George) Herbert and (Gerard Manley) Hopkins, in terms of how to fuse secular and sacred longing in a poem. At one and the same time, I resist organized religion and am intrigued by it. So it seems perfect to live in the shadow of the Basilica, without spending a lot of time entering the building itself, and yet living a life not unconnected with the daily routine there. In the morning, I look out the window and can see, all at once, a fleet of nuns passing, some teenage girls jogging past the nuns, a gay couple holding hands, and a homeless person making the morning rounds—it’s a heady mix, which is something one gets, of course, in a city.

You split your time between here and Massachusetts—summers on Cape Cod, the rest of the year teaching at Washington University. Do you write here and in Massachusetts?

I think I write the same amount there as here. In Massachusetts the solitude does help. I spend a lot of hours doing what looks like nothing, staring off into space. Here, the hecticness of life at the university and in a city in general creates a pressure that’s been oddly productive. I’m more likely to write what I think of as a finished poem here in St. Louis. It’s as if some part of me realizes that there is less time available here, so when I do have time to write, I can’t afford to waste it. Whereas I’ll often leave from the Cape at the end of summer and think I’ve written a lot of poems, but it’ll turn out that only a few of those are worth keeping.

Different kinds of poems sometimes emerge from the two different environments. The first poem I wrote here in St. Louis was triggered by a story in the news about a gay man who’d been killed by a straight man pretending to want to pick the other man up for sex; he’d led him into the woods, killed him, cut off his penis. It seemed weird and ritualistic and frightening, and made me wonder what kind of a place I’d come
to. But it led to a poem in *From the Devotions*, about that urge to follow someone in the name of desire and how that desire can blind one to other very real dangers.

The title poem of *From the Devotions*, on the other hand, was inspired by incidents at Herring Cove Beach in Provincetown. I kept seeing men lying on blankets with little piles of stones beside them. It turned out that the pile represented a dead friend or dead lover. I was fascinated by this way of maintaining devotion and wanting to have something that stood for the past relationships. And at the same time, these men were very much aware of other men going by, so they were open to new adventure. That’s what started me thinking about devotion and the nature of it and especially how to reconcile devotion to the dead with the impulses of the living. Both poems are concerned with the same impulse, with desire and its place, but they come at these issues from very different angles. I feel that some of this must have to do with the different perspective that comes from being in a different place.