Poets On Place
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Driveway

We stop at the home of some dear friends for a night and a fabulous dinner. We even bring in a dessert that my wife makes in Winnie Cooper’s tiny stove. We drink wine and show some photos from the trip and hear about our friends and all they’ve been up to for the past year. They spent a week in Ireland recently and have just obtained two new puppies, but mostly they want to know about us. Where did we like it the best? Where are we going to go after the trip? What is the book about? Are we ever going to get jobs again?

We spend hours on a backyard patio, eating, laughing, and catching up; and then they take us inside, show us our room. It’s a giant guest bedroom done up in yellows and whites. There’s a stack of towels on one chair. It smells like potpourri. Even the lights are dimmed. We close the door, get undressed and into bed. We lie there for a while talking about the next day, the next highway.

When it’s clear we’re not going to get to sleep, we sneak out of the room, down the hallway, pet one of the puppies who is still awake, and softly escape out the front door. We open Winnie Cooper, leaving it completely dark, and slip into our own bed. We feel foolish. We get on a giggle streak that makes my eyes water and my belly hurt. But in a few minutes we’re dead asleep. I don’t hear a thing until a kid on a bike whacks the side of the motor home with a newspaper the next morning.
Scott Cairns
Columbia, Missouri

A college campus makes me simply drunk with happiness. My wife drops me near the parking lot of a new building going up at the University of Missouri, and I am swallowed up by teeming groups of college students escaping at fifty minutes past the hour. Four lanes of traffic come to a dead stop as hundreds of book-bagged and terribly thin, attractive, fresh-faced students stroll across College Street toward unseen dorms, apartments, or elsewhere. Two kids play footbag as they walk. One girl flips off her sandals right in the crosswalk, punches them into a purse, and never loses a beat in her cell-phone conversation.

I walk around longer than I might normally, just to soak all of it in. Young men with sleeveless shirts and earrings. Young women with earrings and sleeveless dresses. I peer in through the windows to the library, and it looks like a college catalog admissions brochure: three students huddle around a gleaming computer, one older student pointing a younger student the way to the stacks, the restrooms, the elevator, whatever. A professorial woman beams out at me as I look in.

Scott Cairns is waiting in his Tate Hall office for me. He’s recently moved offices, so he’s still in the honeymoon phase, shuffling books from case to case, looking for just the right angle for the desk.

He’s a genial guy, as interested in me and my questions as he is in answering them well. We talk about his background in Washington State, a place I love as well. We talk about his early work, which he identifies as being the most place oriented, but we get around eventually to the spiritual.

Cairns has written for years as a part of a quest (my word) to come to an understanding of the presence (his word) of God. He finds glimpses of meaning while writing, and each poem helps him fill in the great unknowns in his search.

Together we wonder if spiritual landscape fits the overall theme of this book project. And while we ponder it, Cairns talks a bit about the physical landscape of his youth—the mist and the mountains and the rocky beaches of the Pacific Northwest. In those places, overgrown, thick, heavy, and seemingly always shrouded in vapor, he found his way. How like that is his work as a man?
How has place impacted your poetry?

I grew up in Tacoma, Washington, and spent most of my summers on the coast, or the peninsula, or in the Cascades. So beaches figure in. Old-growth timber figures in my imagination. And rainforest. Mountains. All of these are laden with special weight in my imagination. And whether or not that pressure ever translates into a particular text for a particular reader is probably beside the point.

Although certain textures of the places I’ve lived in the meantime—Virginia, Utah, Texas, Missouri—have certainly surfaced in poems, I think the landscape of the imagination is fairly established, pretty much dominant. Since I left my home in Washington State in 1978, it’s been an imagined landscape rather than the one immediately before me that provides most of the pressure.

But I go back to Washington, camp there with the family, ride the ferries, slog through the underbrush; and those visits keep the vividness of that place available, its particularities and its general feel. Which is to say, those visits keep me haunted by that place, those misty, high mountain ranges, especially when the clouds and the sky are very close.

I haven’t been thinking about literal places so much, because circumstances have moved me away from the literal place that has kept such a hold on me. In the interim, I think I’ve had recourse to texts as substitute places. So a (Wallace) Stevens poem like “The Idea of Order at Key West” becomes, in a sense, my beach. And I continue to write poems off of that poem, as a way to embrace at once both the textual beach of the moment and my beach of the imagination.

Do you see a connection between the landscape of your youth and the landscape of your more spiritual poems?

Yes, because when I say that the landscape of my youth haunts me, that’s indistinguishable in my mind to the sensation I experience in regard to the presence. Those evergreens and mists comprise a landscape that’s currently available to me; yet when I’m in it, I feel a sacred aspect to the place before me, as if the apparent is the beginning of an enormity that is, say, less apparent, suggested. And I suppose I’m just figuring this out now, but that dynamic is very much like the way I feel about poetry. Poetry is an opportunity to articulate a presence that I suspect, but wouldn’t expect to exhaust. I think these sensations—regarding the sacred place and regarding the poem—are complementary, if not identical.

One poem of mine, “Mr. Stevens Observes the Beach,” was one of my recent attempts to write about a place that was right in front of me.
And even there, the poem’s success lies in evoking, in performing what I’d call an apprehension of the ineffable. Stevens didn’t overtly show up in the poem until later drafts. When we lived in Virginia Beach, we lived about a block and half from the Chesapeake. The beach there started to bring back the beach of my youth. It was a completely different scene, but I wanted to talk about that odd return, my sense that the prior scene was also present in the current one—you know about my God obsession, right? By their nature, beaches tend to evoke, to perform the marginal space between what you know and what you don’t. They’re emblematic for me of that powerful interstice.

So, while the immediate place I’m living isn’t something that I’ve deliberately attended to, it’s inevitably having an effect. Just as in worship, for instance, the literal attitude of your body has a lot to do with the attitude of your prayer, your spirit. It took me thirty years to figure that out. So I do think the attitude of one’s physical location, physical body, is always going to inflect the psyche, the heart.

Is there anything physical about the journey you’ve been making through the spiritual landscape?

One of the first texts that started me off toward the Christian East was a book called *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Those desert fathers were, for the most part, ascetics who literally lived in desert places. So we’re talking a genuinely barren landscape, where there is, nonetheless, this well—this inexhaustible welling of the presence—that is glimpsed, perhaps, because other distractions are subdued. So these fathers subdued a lot of the distractions that you and I toil with, the cacophony that we suffer. They found a way to dim, to quell somewhat, the constant din of human commerce, and so were able to apprehend a lushness even there, even in the desert. And I guess that’s what I’m hooked by, the idea of the kingdom of God, which is every bit as available as any other place. By the way, I’m not one of your Gnostic-apocalyptic Christians who believe that we have to destroy the world in order to attain the kingdom of God. It’s a tilt of the head, a tilt of the heart. A leaning in to what is constant and present and inviting.

Honoring a place, wherever that place is, is just a matter of paying attention. And suddenly you have this apprehension of an inexhaustible fullness around us. I get glimpses of that sometimes, glimpses that alert me to its reality. It doesn’t happen all the time. Just a little taste to keep me going.
Mud Trail

I’d been walking the mud trail, the mud leaping out the sides of my boots for hours. I was thinking I was alone, surrounded only by the high reach of douglas fir and cedar. I think it was a change in the air I noticed first, a warmer, heavier scent of animal, I was alone in a small clearing, then I was not alone and was surrounded by a hundred elk rising, or a single elk rising a hundred times. And the forest was a moving river of elk, none of them hurrying away, but all slowly feeling ahead, and beginning their journey to the east, a hundred times the same journey.

Miles from there, they would rest, bed down among huckleberry and salal, all of them pulling in their hundred sets of hooves, lowering a hundred velvetted heads, waiting for whatever sign or word that calls them all together to rise again.

—Scott Cairns
The sun is going down in Manhattan, a modest and hilly midwestern college town that is laid out along the Kansas River. We park in a church parking lot, and I walk over to Elizabeth Dodd’s place with my bag of equipment. She lives near her academic home, Kansas State, and she’s just home from class when I arrive. The sun peeks through a stand of trees, and we sit on a screened porch in her backyard. Cars go by, but the town seems awfully distant.

Like many academics, Dodd is where she is partly because of a job. Born in Colorado, raised in Appalachia, she finds herself in the prairie of central Kansas, a striking and beautiful landscape somewhat at odds with the region’s stereotypes. Her own work has been informed by all of the places I’ve mentioned, but Kansas figures prominently in her book Archetypal Light. While we talk, she reads portions of it; and as she does, I close my eyes and see the prairie on fire with millions of tiny red plants and see the trees of the poems take human form.

A number of the poets I’ve spoken to have acknowledged how important the natural world and its elements are to their work. Are there features of the natural world that influence your work?

The first great landscapes of my life were the mountain landscapes of Colorado and the hill landscapes of Appalachia. When I moved here, to tallgrass prairie in Kansas, I felt enormous loss and vulnerability. There was no cover. I mean, I have trees in this yard, but from here to Topeka there’s nothing as far as woodlands are concerned. There’s all this grass out there and the horizon opening on and on, the sense of two vast horizontals, between which we walk as upright, vertical forms. I felt quite at sea out here in the tallgrass prairie. And it took three or four years for this landscape to enter my psyche.

So now I feel that there are really three landscapes that play in my emotional life, that play in my aesthetic life. But, of course, one travels. One of the great things about the academic world is that you can take off in the summer. And any place can be interesting; and if you’re there long enough, you start to notice what’s significant about it, what’s beautiful about it, what’s wounded about it. I’ve recently begun to spend time in the backcountry of the northern Cascades, where my brother lives. He
is an environmental activist and an excellent backpacking companion, and we have taken three really wonderful trips into the wilderness and into areas that he is working to save. He’s taken me to camp underneath fir trees that are truly old growth, five, six, or seven hundred years old. Some of my most recent poems have been coming out of this experience.

One element that this book is dealing with is regionalism. Some of the poets I’ve met are adamant about being classified as regionalists. They really feel that they are from some place and that their work represents and captures that place, so they want to claim it. But not everyone feels that way. Is there anything about Colorado or Appalachia that you still feel beholden to?

Oh, of course. In literary history, regionalism was often a pejorative, a lesser subset of realism. But it sounds to me as though people are reclaiming it. I certainly have heard critics do that, and you’re reporting that poets are as well. But in literary history regionalism was a form of limitation. It was a diminutive, and it suggested something of narrowness, something of cramp.

But, I certainly don’t experience a relationship with any kind of a locale in that way. Even so, now that I am here in the middle of my life and I do feel that I have these three important landscapes, I don’t think I can say that I’m a regional writer. I think I’m a writer to whom landscape and physical locale matter enormously. If I ever am writing as a regional writer, I would suppose it’s as someone from Appalachia, from having a childhood there, a kind of past that you never leave. But I’ve lived on the Great Plains, the prairies, for fourteen years, and I do write a fair amount about that. I love the light and the openness.

Is there work of yours in particular that you’d say has come about primarily because of place?

Yes. My second book, Archetypal Light, is the clearer example. A lot of these poems were written out of a period in my life when I was trying to come to feel at home in a prairie landscape, when emotionally I was feeling marooned in that kind of space. And once I began to feel at home here, a lot of these poems celebrate that. The book really is a very celebratory collection. It is an attempt to think about the aesthetics
of existence, the beauty of language, the ache of landscape, a sense of
deep time.

Every spring the ranchers burn the prairie, getting ready for the
rejuvenation of the grasses. We’re in range country; this is cattle
country. One night I was out on some prairie that is owned by the
Nature Conservancy and administered by the Division of Biology here
at Kansas State University. It’s called the Konza Prairie. It’s the most
stunning place. It’s 8,500 acres. Two hundred bison. We were up on
one of those high flat-top hills, after dark, listening for birds, watching
the sky. I was coming down, passed this great tree, an oak tree, sort of
spreading out. And I just suddenly realized that I was in a savannah.
And I had never thought of this. I thought, “I’m a hominid,” because
that’s what hominids did; they walked everywhere. They walked out of
Africa, and some of them, it seems, walked back. They went everywhere.
And there I was walking down this narrow grassland trail. So I got a
very profound sense of deep time and was interested for a while in some
reading I was doing about Paleolithic time in the short-grass prairie,
farther west from here, and some of the volcanic activity that was going
on then. And all of these ideas began to adhere; and instead of having
verticality and the lift of trees or the lift of mountains as an aesthetic
touchstone, I was thinking about the horizontal, that horizontal line.
Here, the hills are flat on top, as if someone has brushed the top of them
with a hand. There’s that great expanse of skyline.

In terms of how it’s affected my work, it’s always seemed to me
that how we live is one of the great subjects of poetry. It’s how we are
who we are. And for me, that means the material life in landscape,
the physical life in landscape, at least as much as it means personal
interrelationships among human beings.

If you look up “place” in the Oxford English Dictionary, you’ll find
the list of meanings is just enormous. But here are some that are quite
pertinent to what we’re discussing: “A particular part of space, of defined
or undefined extent, but of definite situation. Sometimes applied to a
region or a part of the earth’s surface.”

That language suggests an ability both to focus right where the feet
are placed and to pull back in order to gain a sense of context, of the
largeness of possibility. That is, all the other places we might be if we
weren’t here. If we think about it, being present, being here is often
highlighted, illuminated, with recognition of fragility. We are fragile, of
course, mortal and mutable in ways that the places we love are not; yet,
in the modern era of ecological disaster and environmental devastation,
we know that the larger, enduring landscape is now vulnerable in ways
it wasn’t, even a century ago.
Sonnet, Almost

In the near canyon wall
the rock wren wrests
architectural presence, chest-
high in the sandstone’s dry, pale
potential that opens, diurnal,
under post-solstice sunlight shifting
in the south, to all
the world utters, birdsong or cliff ringed
with the music that fills
(if you listen) each aperture left
when rock or root fell,
leaving this brightening cleft
we now find, mouth turned to the world
saying “here is my heart, yes, take hold.”

—Elizabeth Dodd
Jonathan Holden
Manhattan, Kansas

Holden is a wryly funny man, who is quick with a hearty laugh. We sit in a spacious and beautiful living room in his home in Manhattan and talk easily about all manner of things, my favorite being a story about some girls heckling him for being too skinny when he was young. He turns to me and recalls their jeer, “Skinny Man, Skinny Man,” bringing back the memory with real pleasure and maybe the smallest amount of leftover tragedy.

He sits on a padded loveseat that is draped with a white afghan. He is indeed still skinny, dressed in slacks and a nice sweater. He brings up Wordsworth a couple of times, and we both recall the same line, “emotion recollected in tranquility.” And to be sure I know he’s not just an academic, he recalls his great love for the actress Kim Novak and the powerful impact she had on him when he saw her years ago in the film, Picnic, with William Holden.

He enjoys the questions about place but lets me know that there’s only so much he’ll say about it. As I’ve discovered before, poets keep close some of those things most important to their writing, and I sense I’m intruding.

Instead, Holden gets up and shows me a gigantic wooden deck that stretches out to the side of the house. I tell Holden how much I like it, and he tells me he does, too, but he regrets how often it has to be resealed. He hires someone to do it and thinks he probably pays too much. The dollar amount sounds high to me, but I think to myself there’s not much of a chance I’d do it for any less. The point is it’s a nice spot to sit and read or just listen to the birds or the traffic. “Now that’s a nice place,” he says, winking at me.

How do you think the places of your life have impacted your writing?

Well, what is the cliché? “Good writing shows.” And so, if one is going to show an experience, then one has to be in a place and show the landscape of the experience. And I always took that very literally.

One of my better poems is called “Names of the Rapids,” and it’s about being on a river; and I was definitely in a place there. And the landscape is dramatic, and, of course—in my opinion—all poems are sort of a narrative or stories. So there has to be a drama to the narrative,
otherwise there’s no story. One’s looking around in one’s life for events which have some believable drama in them. Otherwise you have nothing to talk about.

The question of subject matter is a major question with me, always has been. I made a sort of aesthetic decision, one might say, as a critic, that I would begin writing about subject matter as being important to poems, rather than form. Content is more important than form. So it’s a kind of antimodernist view of mine about subject matter.

*What about the elements of the natural world? Are they just markers in a poem, or do they amount to more than that?*

It depends on the poem. We’ve all studied the French Symbolists; and in *symboliste* poetry they can come to symbolize some things, and in other modes of poetry they don’t. I don’t know. Every single poem is sui generis; it’s a world unto itself. Some poems have certain kinds of requirements, and others have different kinds of requirements.

*Do you take any inspiration from the natural world?*

Like sunsets and beauty and stuff like that? In “Names of the Rapids” I describe pretty dramatic events that happened. And all good poems have to have some drama in them. Are you going to hype the drama up or not? And I say, hype nothing up. But as Ezra Pound said so famously, “The natural fact is always the adequate symbol.” One doesn’t hype.

*Where do you go, either in a physical or metaphysical sense, to get the material for your poems?*

Basically, the way I work is a Wordsworthian way of working, and it’s all memory. And one has vivid experiences in real life, and after a certain amount of time you can write about them. Less time or more time, it depends.

I think Wordsworth was the first great modern poet. And that’s the way we all still work. All the writers that I know work that way.

Virtually all the poetry I write is from memories. And exactly as Wordsworth describes in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, one goes back and remembers a scene, and it begins to galvanize you; and you get a bit of adrenalin and then the energy goes into the word as you remember vividly. That’s the way I’ve always done it.

*Have there been certain places that have resonated with you long after you were there, places maybe that were so evocative that you found yourself writing about them later?*

Well, there are certain women, if a woman is a place. But I can’t go any further. *(Laughs.)*