Poets On Place

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We spend a long spirit-killing day on I-70, headed west. In western Kansas we start to see snow again. We get $100 worth of gas, and while I pump it, the wind tears through me. It’s 28 degrees. We have another 300 miles to get to Denver, but I’m just fried. I begin thinking, “What in the world have we done?” We pull out of the gas station, and we eat up the flat land in tiny chunks. The message is, I guess, the travel is not always fun. My wife takes over the driving, and I go in the back and collapse on the couch, pulling notes and tapes from the trip out of several large boxes. I’m trying to work, putting things in order, but as I look at the madly arranged and out-of-control collection of information, I begin thinking, “What in the world have I done?”

It is not the first time I’ve wondered what all of this means. What kind of book will this be? Who else besides me wants to know this stuff? In the beginning I knew we’d have to go to the poets and look for answers there, but there are moments like this when I feel lost. I get a delicious idea to just open the side windows and let the papers blow out into the prairie landscape. That would be fitting, or ironic, or maybe just plain dumb.

When I feel the motor home slowing down, I’m initially angry. Jesus, we just stopped a little while ago. I knock something over and then nearly tumble into the cab as Winnie Cooper comes to a short stop. I’m trying to think of something horrible to say to the inconsiderate driver when I see why we’ve stopped. Any roadside sign out here is a welcome break from the flatness, but this one is a beauty. It’s all black, about twenty feet across, low to the ground, four stubby yellow flags flying on top. Crude white letters spell out “FIVE LEGGED LIVE STEER. LIVE RATTLESNAKES. PET THE BABY PIGS. NEXT EXIT.”

My wife smiles at me. I figure the papers can be dealt with later on. I give her the okay, and soon we are surrounded by pigs.
Bin Ramke
Denver, Colorado

After a cold night on the outskirts, we find our way to the University of Denver, where I’m scheduled to meet with Bin Ramke, a terrific poet and editor, whose work I’ve loved for years. Aside from his own poetry, he’s widely revered for his work as the editor for Denver Quarterly and the University of Georgia Contemporary Poetry Series. His choices for both venues are always impeccable—clear, lyrical work of a wide variety, always challenging, always opening.

For the past few years, in addition to his duties here in Denver, Ramke has taught as a visiting writer in Chicago at the Art Institute, and he talks about the interesting dynamic that created. Fall semesters in Chicago—with endless museums and ever-present public transportation—and then spring and summers in Denver, a more sprawling city, where cars and highways fill every conceivable space in between the mountains.

I go inside his building, and Ramke greets me warmly in the hallway outside his office. His desk is crowded with books and papers. Behind him the wall groans with a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. It’s all neat, but the room is full. He picks up a collection of poems off the chair and motions for me to sit. The book is the newest offering from his poetry series, and he asks if I’ve seen it.

We talk a bit about the trip, and he asks after some of his pals whom I’ve seen. He sees the camera and the recorders come out, and he feigns nervousness for a moment. His manner is quiet and serene. When I talk, he listens intently; when he speaks, it’s slowly with articulation and a little élan. He looks past me suddenly, as if remembering, “Where’s your wife?” I tell him we found a temporary spot in a parking lot nearby, and she’s likely reading the newspaper or walking around campus. “Do you think she’d like to come in?” he says, but then stops himself. “She’d probably rather see the campus than hear me,” he says with a laugh.

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After a childhood in the South and a decade as an adult in Georgia, you came to Colorado. What was that change of location like for you?

It was a big deal, and there’s no denying that place had a lot to do with it. The question is “What does place mean?” In a certain sense it meant for me in that particular move a more urban setting.
The first big issue for me was that this felt like a city. My whole development goes from a childhood in Orange, Texas, which probably still has a population of around twenty-five thousand, and then Columbus, Georgia, which at the time I didn’t really appreciate. It really was a community, next to Fort Benning, Georgia, and this amazing set of cultures that sometimes came into conflict or collusion.

I do like Denver very much, love much about the people here, the experiences. But Denver has a very curious relation to race. It’s a very white city. There are important racial issues here. It’s not a racist city, but its racial consciousness is curiously oversimplified. Growing up in the South and living in Georgia, one of the things I noticed about Denver was the lack of cultural diversity. It was available, but you had to look for it.

What about the more obvious physical differences in the landscape?

The landscape here has always been curious to me. The mountains feel like a barrier, whereas water has always felt like a connection. I didn’t really live near any ocean in Georgia, but Florida wasn’t that far away. And there were rivers everywhere.

This part of the West feels isolated to me. And it’s a curious thing about the West as I’ve come to understand it. People react to the identical kind of elements—some see it as freeing. You can get in your vehicle and drive for miles. But that necessity to get in your vehicle and go many miles to get anywhere feels isolating to me.

You spend part of each year in Chicago teaching at the Art Institute. How is that city experience different from this one or your time in Georgia?

One of the curious things about spending fall semesters in Chicago is having real public transportation. It feels so liberating. I can jump on a train or a bus. I feel like I can move around. It’s more of a city than Denver. And that is partly because public transportation is available. I have the kind of access to things there that would never be available to me personally and individually here in Denver. I thought of museums very differently after having spent time in Chicago. Instead of it being a place where the detritus of rich people’s lives was collected (laughs), it became quite the opposite: a place where the poorest among us could go see things that, in other circumstances, were held back only for the privileged.

The theme is access to something. It’s curious because back in Georgia I had greater access to actual personal lives, in a much wider range. I’m thinking in part of classes, the children of both the owners of the mills—mills that go back to the Civil War—and then the children of the workers. There was a disparaging term that was used—lintheads. I can remember having an early morning class, and I had a student in the
class who had lint in his hair because he came to class right from his
shift at the mill. Where I teach now is a private university, although not
all my students are children of the privileged and wealthy.

Cities provide another kind of contact and a wider connection to an
intellectual community.

What is there, do you think, that connects poetry to place?

I suppose people will tend to think of the connection of poetry and
place through imagery, through geographical and geological imagery.
I’ve tended to use the fact that our geology is so much more visible
here in the West. It’s magnificent. You can take a little drive and see
millions of years in rock formation and rock strata. That’s a highly
significant part of the effect of place. In the last three books that I’ve
done, there’s a huge use of the Oxford English Dictionary, and the OED
is based on a kind of geology of the language. You can dig through and
see the originary uses of language. I’m fascinated, drunk with that stuff.
I see that as paralleling my awareness of a kind of past that becomes
visible in certain ways in the landscape. It occurs to me that the softer—
geologically softer—South, as opposed to this harder geological region
of the West, is somehow connected. The past is extremely present in the
South, but it’s also decomposing and turning into something else. But
here, that past of the mountains is visible and much more resistant to
seasonal changes. There’s a way that my own work has wanted to show
much longer historical and geographic reverberations.

As an editor, do you get a sense of where poetry lives in America and
maybe what it says about America?

Poetry seems to not have a public place in the national consciousness
of any significance, and yet, seeing all of this work that comes from
everywhere, it’s clear that poetry has an enormously significant vital
place. People feel this desire to write it, and huge numbers of people do.
Thousands of manuscripts come in. There’s been a consistent flow of
material that comes from everywhere in the country.

We’re a country that has this desire to see itself as something
singular and unified. We want to wave a big flag and say we are well
defined. But simultaneously we recognize that we are not. We are made
up of hugely diverse groups and individuals. There’s a weird desperation
that comes out of that. And because Americans have traveled so much
and since they don’t have a strong ancestral identity, I see evidence of
some strange yearning to belong to a certain place. I’m not advocating
a return to something or a kind of nostalgia. Even if we needed to, we
couldn’t.
Kenneth Brewer
Logan, Utah

The trip out of Colorado into Utah is winding. An hour or so from Logan, right near the border, we pull into the Hometown Diner, a place that advertises their famous raspberry shake and that is completely run—it seems—by fourteen-year-olds. Missy takes our order, and someone else starts the food cooking. Once the burgers are ready, Missy brings them and then retreats behind the counter. She rests her elbow on the counter, places her chin on her hand, and stares out the window at the empty road.

The town—Garden City—is picturesque, clean, and snug against a brilliant blue lake. We can see deer across the road munching on the grass and a gigantic mountain pushed against us from the west. I want to say to Missy, “What a great town. You must love it here.”

But as Missy stares out the window, I think of myself at that age and sense she is like I was—waiting for the end of the shift, the end of high school, and the start of her life somewhere away from here.

We leave a big tip, get back on the road, and wind around for another hour before we emerge into Logan. We are surrounded by deep green valleys, pastures, horses, cows, beautiful farmhouses, all ringed by snowcapped mountains.

Logan itself, the home to Utah State, is gorgeous. Neat houses spill up and down long, sloping valleys. Downtown is neat and closed up tight on a Sunday morning. Families travel wide white sidewalks on the way to one of several churches, the most stunning, the Logan Mormon Tabernacle.

Ken Brewer—a most gentle and genial host—and I have a long friendly chat in his comfortable living room. A westerner since the early 1960s, he delights in debunking for me some of the more romantic myths. He’s a realist and loves to show the places of his life in clear, unvarnished colors.

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How have the places of your life influenced the work you do as a poet?

Dramatically. I grew up in Indianapolis, the thirteenth largest city in the country. The neighborhood was very important. It was the east side of Indianapolis. We were two blocks east of the railroad tracks. On
the other side of the railroad tracks the neighborhood changed. On the west side, all the kids went to Tech High School, which was enormous. It was not a college prep school. It had all the auto shop, mechanic, and home economics classes. A really big school, a whole city block campus. I went to Howe High School, which was a college prep school. Those two blocks changed my life.

I left home as soon as high school was over and went to New Mexico. That move to Silver City, New Mexico, which is twenty minutes from the Gila Wilderness, was an incredible change in place.

The New Mexico landscape was very important to me. I had to learn an entirely new landscape—desert flora and fauna. And the weather was different—dry heat, a different kind of lightning and thunder. Different rain and the rare snowstorms that didn’t stay on the ground for weeks and eventually turn black.

Then I came here to the Cache Valley in 1968. This is a different landscape, an alpine landscape. This is a high valley here. All of those things have been important, although I don’t write about place per se. It’s still an important setting and symbol for the people and creatures that I write about.

**What has the West meant to you as a writer?**

Vision. I use that in a literal and figurative way. Vision in the sense that you can see so far. I didn’t start writing poetry until I was in New Mexico. I’m a more oral poet, and I think that’s a western thing. And I think there’s a sense of tone that goes along with that. It seems to me that western writers have a different tone.

Sometimes the endings of poems have an ironic twist, a sardonic tone. And I don’t see that in western writing. That’s a part of that vision. Not only that sense of being able to see so much farther, but also that sense of vision of what your connection with the world is all about.

In Indianapolis I was around people all the time. Concrete. I think my vision of my place in the world would have been different if I’d stayed there. Coming west really opened my feeling of connection with the world.

**Do you think poets have a responsibility to capture something of the places of their lives? Are you responsible to the West in any way?**

I want to argue about the West. Not that I think it’s my responsibility to do that. I’ve slowly come to understand the West, and it’s not the West that I knew as a kid. I suspect it’s not at all what people east of the Mississippi think of, at least not politically.

And I’m not very romantic in my writing or understanding of place. I want to be as realistic as possible. A couple of things tweak me. I don’t care much for the missionaries who come from the East. I run into a
lot of people from the East who think they’re bringing culture to the West. I’ve got news for them. We’ve got plenty, thank you. We get these people who come in here, and they think they’re doing us a great favor bringing themselves and their culture to us. Invariably they talk about how terrible it is here, and I’m saying, “I write; I read!”

And then this romantic image of the West, this old cowboy image. That’s been so romanticized, and there are still some western writers who continue that image of the West. It’s not at all realistic. It was never true. From what I’ve studied, the typical gunfight—the face-down, the quick-draw—hardly ever happened, if ever. Most of the killings were back shootings or accidents. It’s hard to shoot somebody with those pistols, especially the way they show it in the movies.

I’m not too sure about the singing cowboy either. I grew up a Roy Rogers fan, Gene Autry. I liked them both. I had a Roy Rogers lamp, Roy and Trigger. Trigger’s in that upright position. That was my bedroom lamp. I don’t know about singing cowboys. I guess there might have been a few. (Laughs.)

And then images about the sense of respect for the place and the land. I think that gets a little distorted. There might have been some people who had great respect for the land as they were discovering it, but discovery seems to me a pretty brutal experience for everyone involved. I don’t think discovering the West was this idealistic event.

The realistic images of the discovery of the West are not that clean. Patricia Limerick did a wonderful book called *Legacy of Conquest*. She gives a pretty realistic description of that westward movement. Even the language of that was “conquering.” It was brutal stuff. It was not romantic. So when I try to write about the West, I want to write realistically and take some of the edge off that romanticism.
Rekdal and I spend part of a sunny morning in the front room of her spectacular and sunny home on a hillside overlooking Salt Lake City. She sits on a giant sofa, and I’m across the room in a large chair.

I was turned on to Rekdal several months ago by a colleague of hers, and I’ve fallen for her work. She loves the West, the inhospitable quality of it that she discovered years ago when she first moved to Wyoming. Now in Salt Lake City—still a small, somewhat hidden, and awfully misunderstood place to many big-city folks—she finds just enough of a mix of things: good restaurants, the towering mountains.

She tells me about her house, about a hundred years old, two stories with an attic. She’s been here only six months, but she’s already had to deal with sixty pounds of peaches off the trees in the front yard. She’s painted the interior already, making it hers. She has her space for working, a private area, which she dedicates to writing and nothing else (taxes are done in another room). She’s started a garden. She’s been here less than a year, but the place she’s made is homely and comfortable.

I know you loved Wyoming. You’ve only been here in Salt Lake City for part of a year. What’s your relationship like with Utah so far?

It’s easier. I’m a little disappointed at how easy it is because one of the attractions of the West is how difficult the geography is and how difficult it is to feel at home.

It’s depressing in that sense because I moved to Utah, and it’s not really the West. Or at least my idea of what the West is. Like any other place, there are strip malls here and the Banana Republic, foreign food, foreign films. The problem with America is that all the towns are looking the same. Still, it’s stunning and gorgeous, and there’s such an outdoor ethic. It doesn’t seem to be the kind of special or isolated place that Wyoming is. Part of me is happy about that, and part of me is not.

What was it about Wyoming that struck you so hard? I know that it had quite an impact on you.

As soon as I got off the plane and saw it. That did it. The plains with these low hills, and there was so much space. It was an instant connection. I’ve grown up in urban environments, and I think that what
attracted me to the West is that you are forced to think of your connection to the natural environment, not simply see it as an amusement of some kind. The West, because of the space, because of the water issues, because of the isolation, forces you to consider what your relationship is with the land. It’s changed the way I see myself. It’s like having a new identity.

Growing up in Washington State there were all these trees, these lush gardens, and parks. And then I came to this place that was absolutely denuded. One time while hiking, I had to fight the impulse to just crawl across this one meadow because the sky was so oppressive. That sense of being physically overwhelmed was intoxicating. I was trying to negotiate what it was like to live in a place that didn’t want me in it. It’s absolutely inhospitable, arid, and unyielding.

What surprises me is that the environment had a huge impact on me as a person, but as far as I can see, it hasn’t obviously affected my work as a poet. There are poets that I think reflect the West very well in their work. James Galvin is one. His poems are these spare, pared-back pieces that seem to accept white space, the openness of an image or a line. He doesn’t rush to fill in logical or semantic gaps in his poems like I do and like many poets I deeply admire might. I read Galvin many years before moving to Laramie, and I have to admit that his work didn’t make much emotional sense to me. Only after moving to Wyoming, less than forty miles from the place Galvin himself ranched and worked and wrote, did his poems really begin to take shape for me.

The lyrics I am most interested in are less essentially cerebral, more plot or narrative based. This may actually have something to do with the West, since the region seems to attract so many fiction writers: prose is highly regarded here, especially environmental nonfiction. In Wyoming, there were maybe five poets I met or heard of or interacted with, as opposed to dozens of fiction writers. Utah has a different mix, and that mostly has to do with the program at the University of Utah, its long-standing reputation in poetry, due to Larry Levis and Mark Strand. I think people are most strongly invested in prose writers who deal with the environment, the ones who recognize this weird and intimate connection western communities have with their landscapes. I think it’s why Gretel Erlich and Terry Tempest Williams and Mark Spragg and James Galvin and Rick Bass have done so well here. And perhaps I’m responding to a kind of low-level peer pressure in writing more accessible, fiction-friendly poems.

Do you think poets have any obligation or responsibility to capture something about the places of their lives?

No. I feel a responsibility, but that’s a very personal thing. I feel for me that nothing is really real until I finish writing it. It gives you this
idea that “It’s okay to die now because I got this down, and this down, and this down.”
There’s a record. But that ties me down to particulars of my own existence and doesn’t free the imagination. It can become a sort of obsessive note taking toward death.

I recently wrote two poems that explicitly address place: one about Ireland, where I lived for a year over a decade ago, and one about Wyoming. My attempt to write poems about place have usually been attempts to capture a particular feeling or series of events, and in this way I’ve been consistently frustrated. Mostly, in fact, I don’t write poems specifically about place at all. I think what’s allowed me to write these two recent poems is the decision to bring radically different anecdotes-narratives into the poem, to animate the landscape with a perspective that isn’t that of a tourist or visitor. In “The Invention of the Kaleidoscope,” for instance, there’s the story of Sir David Brewster, who invented the kaleidoscope, the story of a breakup with an Irish boyfriend (who is really a hodgepodge of a whole bunch of exes), and, of course, the landscape of Ireland. In “Ode,” a poem about Wyoming, I refer to national politics, a car crash, a Greyhound bus ride, the idea of failure. Wyoming simply becomes the animating force behind all this.

I’m thinking of poets who wrote about place or poets who traveled extensively and wrote what I think are successful poems about that experience. The best one is Elizabeth Bishop, but the poems of hers I most respond to aren’t actually poems about a particular, real place so much as poems that question the need to travel at all and, in that, question our very belief in the ability to capture a place. What really differentiates towns or countries or nations but our imagination of them? Imagination might be the place in which we really live, and so to write anything at all is thus to “capture place.”
Ode

And now the silver, ripping sound of white on white, the satin, light snow torn under wheels, car bang metally grenading, and the wood poles, whipping, loom—

I have always wanted to sing a song of praise for the unscathed: myself stepping from the fractured car whose black axle’s one inch from gone; slim pole slicing cable up to sheet metal, seat foam, corduroy (like butter, the mechanic will later tell me, poking a stiff finger through the cloth), to pierce the exact point I was supposed to sit, stopping because praise begins where pain transfigures itself, stoppered by a deeper kind of joy: so I transfigure myself from driver to survivor, the blessed Lazarine failure bolting up and opening her eyes. And here are the thousand wrecks from a life configured in snow before me: myself, at five, pulled from the burning car seat; at twelve, bleeding from the scalp after the car throws me from my bike; at fourteen, tumbling over the slick hood rushing;
sockets of windows with glass
bashed out into a translucent, toothy ring; lights
and bumpers clipped clean off; tires burst; deer
gravitationally hurled through my windshield; brakes
given out and worse,

the icy loop de loops
on roads, the trucker's 16 fat wheels squealing—

All the ways technology should have killed me

and didn't.
Praise for my death-hungry luck!
And all the manner in which I've failed it—
marriage lost,

buried in the blanks of white space, my solitude
at the Greyhound station
knowing no one to retrieve me,
carless among the others pressed tight
to their own disaster or boredom—
unbearably young mothers,

drifters, boy soldiers
shoulder to shoulder with the insane, weaving
the same thread of conversation back and forth
between ourselves. How

could this happen to me
at this age, at this stage, how
did I not notice, and will you put this seat up?
and will you lend me this quarter? and will you
call me a cab when we get back home?
The young man in the seat before me, head full of zigzagging tight braids says,
*Sure you can dig up that ballot box in Florida and while you’re at it look up all the bones buried in the Everglades,* repeats it

for the amusement of the woman across from him, who knows a presidential failure like she knows herself, and when we pass my accident on the road points and whistles, snickers: *Bet you no one walked away from that one.*

For this, and for all these things: praise

to the white plains of Wyoming, highway coiled like a length of rime-colored rope; to snow broiling in the sunlight so that the landscape takes on a nuclear glow, so bright

we have to shield our eyes from it. Praise for myself playing at morbidity because I thought I had a right to it

as if flesh had to follow spirit to such a pure depth the bones themselves could not rest but must be broken, nerves singed then ripped out, the heart clench madly in its chest. As if

I had nothing except this white earth, this smashed car to praise
what I knew before and know
even better now, the hills
cold as a hip bone and tufted with ice. Praise
to my youth and to my age, praise
to ambition and small-mindedness,
the kind I recognize and the kind
I am soon to recognize; praise
to self-hatred for it keeps me alive, and praise
for the splinters of delight that can pierce it.
Praise for wood pole, praise for glass.
Praise for muscle, praise for bone.

The sky is bright as a bowl on a nurse’s table today.

And the sun gleams into it as our bus slides by,
the light of us a wash of gold illuminating
bodies lost, bodies regained; gleaming

like my heart here, on this earth,
bloody and still beating.

—Paisley Rekdal