LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

You Are Here:
Experiencing Place through Poetry

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by
Janet Reeves

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Thesis Committee:
Director: Professor Heather Paul
Reader: Dr. Rachel Griffis

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis contains a collection of poems about Whidbey Island, its plants, wildlife, landscape, character, historical and community events, legends, and landmarks. I have written these out of curiosity about my new location as I begin to claim this place as my home. Imagery will help readers understand the place. Yet some aspects of the place may also, sometimes, function as analogies to help readers understand something else. I have used my knowledge of Whidbey Island in a way that I hope will help readers grasp more than what people can see, hear, touch, smell, or taste in this place. My poems are an invitation to form a connection: writer to reader, experiencing a unique part of creation and honoring its Creator.

The critical paper explores the process of creating a place poem: a not-quite-linear journey from the poet's relationship with a place to an enticing new discovery to a representation of that discovery in the form of a poem. What begins with place ends in poetry, but accurately portraying the nature of a place through poetry requires inspired passion, diligent research, and precise presentation. Successfully combining these elements will result in poetry that leads readers into an experience of the poet's place.

Regarding my experience of Whidbey Island, I have divided this thesis into four sections. "Close to Home Encounters" are poems about wonders discovered within view of my home: flora, fauna, mountains, and a harbor. Poems found in "Island Explorations" celebrate Whidbey's landscape, sights, and structure. "Cultural Immersions" invite readers to experience the traditions, celebrations, legends, occupations, and hobbies of Whidbey's people. Finally, "Historical Allusions" are poems that reveal history's influence on modern-day Whidbey. The island and my observations of it serve as the collection's unifying theme.

Artist Statement

Impetus

Poetry, for me, is both the most challenging and most rewarding writing genre. In a relatively small amount of space, poets must present an idea as an image created by words carefully chosen to reveal a truth, often without directly stating that truth but somehow letting readers believe they found it for themselves. Lawrence Raab, a poet and professor, says that "the poet's use of indirection produces the surprise of discovery, which can become the revelation of truth" (133). Every choice the poet makes in the creation of a poem, whether a choice of form, meter, image, or word, adds a layer of meaning to assist the reader searching for the poem's truth. For this reason, skills refined through poetry enhance a writer's ability in every other genre. Poetry trains writers to make every decision with care and to make the most of every word they use.

By these decisions, poets create experiences for their readers. According to American poet Matt Mason, "A poem is a feeling, an attitude, an emotion that needs solid details or specifics to frame it so that someone else can both understand it and feel it" (Stafford). Through attention to detail in every aspect of their craft, poets walk readers through the experience of an event or help them envision a scene as if viewing a snapshot, or better yet, viewing it for themselves. Poems say to the reader, "I want to share this event, this vision, with you because it was momentous to me and grasping the momentum will benefit you."

I have created this a collection of poems about life on Whidbey Island in Washington State because moving to this place in 2020 was a momentous occasion for me. For the first time in my adult life, I am enjoying the possibility of living in one place for more than four years. My husband, now retired, served as a U.S. Army chaplain for more than twenty years. Throughout

our married life, we have moved every two to three years. We have lived in nine states, one foreign country, and fifteen homes. When the Army sent Mike to Kuwait for a year, I stayed in our home in Midway, Georgia, setting a personal record of four years in one place.

So, when I read an account of a writer who discovered that he felt driven "to write about minor league baseball stadiums" because they made him think of fathers and sons and of being "a good father" to his son (Gerard 25), I realized that I want to write about Whidbey Island because, in a sense, I am attempting to claim it as home. I am trying to prove—to myself and everyone else—that, for now at least, I belong in this place.

According to Philip Gerard, author of *The Art of Creative Research*, "Curiosity is usually rooted deeply in our individual life experience and our natures" (25). I am curious about Whidbey Island because my adult life experience has not included permanency of place. Now that I am living here, I want to discover all I can and treasure every discovery I make. I am immersing myself in this island. My poems represent my collection of Whidbey's wonders, my personal anchors to this place.

Yet these anchors can be so much more to curious readers. Through poetry, writers can share their experience of the world with readers who may never travel to the writer's locale and, therefore, gain an understanding of a corner of the world different from their own. In fact, because an author's experience is unique, even readers from the same place may learn something from such poetry. For example, through an anthology devoted exclusively to salmon in Washington State called *I Sing the Salmon Home,* I learned about geography, Native American culture, the fishing industry, ecological issues, and, of course, the salmon themselves. The book contained a variety of messages. Overall, however, it celebrated salmon, proclaimed their significance, and made the case to protect and preserve them.

My collection of poems about life on Whidbey Island has been inspired by this anthology and others like it. As my fourth anniversary in this place approaches, I continue to make discoveries, some fascinating, some quirky, some inspiring. I enjoy delving deeper through personal research: visiting sites of interest, participating in events, and reading a variety of texts. Through my poetry collection, I invite my readers to share the wonder of my discoveries.

Vision

Every poem in my collection has something to do with Whidbey Island, whether its flora and fauna, a personal experience there, a historical or community event, a legend, or a landmark. Imagery will help readers understand the place. Yet some aspects of the place may also, sometimes, function as analogies to help readers understand something else. The island and my observations of it serve as the collection's unifying theme.

Some of the poems have come from my immersion in this place, that is from my personal experiences. These include sights I have witnessed and events I have participated in. Newspaper articles have supplemented my knowledge of current events. I found historical information in our local library's archives. Yet all poems required my imagination and the wonder of each new discovery. In the prologue to *The Art of Creative Research,* Gerard says, "Every conversation is a story, and every story is an adventure, and every adventure takes me out of my small life into a larger one, and I love that" (viii). I love that, too. Gerard has described my feelings toward this project perfectly. Everything new I encounter on this island that is civilized, but not quite, has the potential of an adventure to experience.

Gerard continues, "After the adventure, I love going somewhere quiet and just listening to the world be quiet, the story settling on me like grace, or like a snowfall, accumulating weight

and shape and even beauty" (xii). Like Gerard, I find I enjoy processing experiences and sights by quietly capturing them with words. Each poem I write about life on Whidbey Island serves as a picture or video that preserves not only the memory but also the personal thoughts that are attached.

Together, the individual poems create a composite image of this place I call home. I imagine it as something like a partially completed puzzle. From the time I was a little girl, I have loved working jigsaw puzzles, but my father taught me never to look at the box. Together we would dump the pieces on the table, then put the box away in a cabinet where we couldn't see it. Of course, we had a general idea of what the finished product would look like; we had seen the box when we chose the puzzle. But once we put the box away, we had to complete the puzzle to see the picture again.

Each poem in my collection serves as a piece of the picture of Whidbey Island. This picture will never be complete; such an accomplishment would be an impossibility. Already I have ideas for more poems than I will ever have time to write, and the island, as is true of any place, is ever-changing. But I do hope I have assembled enough pieces to give my readers an idea of what life on this island is like: how history has shaped it, who and what inhabits it, what these inhabitants value and enjoy, how we interact, where we go, what we do, and what we dream of for our future. I hope these poems will convey my sense of discovery and wonder to my readers, an impression of participation, even ownership, by virtue of intimate knowledge.

Some of my poems may feel familiar to readers who have never visited Whidbey Island yet have similar images in their locales. Others may seem quirky—totally unique, maybe even unbelievable. Together, however, the collection will reveal life here as it is and as it has been

influenced by its past and by a merging of cultures: settlers, natives, civilians, Navy personnel, artists, outdoor enthusiasts, locals, tourists, preservationists, and progressives.

One thing my project lacks, however, is the benefit of other perspectives. Of *I Sing the Salmon Home,* the editor says, "The poems take many forms and reflect many voices: you'll find haiku, villanelles, and pantoums; you'll find poems written by kids, elders, sport fishers, commercial fishers, biologists, and citizens of local tribal nations" (Priest xix). Had I contributed to that anthology, my poems would have come from a different point of view than any of these, and so I know that others who write poetry about Whidbey Island see it differently than I do. As a newcomer to this place, one who has lived in many other homes and who is hoping to make this her final earthly home, I hope Whidbey Island from my perspective will have insights for every reader from the old timer who grew up here to the tourist for a day. I may not be considered a local—yet—but I can help all readers see Whidbey Island in a fresh way, gain appreciation for this place, and notice what they otherwise may not see. U.S. Poet Laureate 2004-2006 Ted Kooser says, "That's the kind of thing you can give readers with your poems, a re-freshening of the world" (8). I may not be able to represent all points of view in my collection, but I can help readers "re-fresh" their unique perspectives.

Literary Context

I believe that a good place poem makes the reader want to be there if only to feel what the poet is feeling, experience what the poet is experiencing, and be a part of the community, culture, or heritage the poet has recreated through the choice and arrangement of words. The poem causes the reader to envision and want to join in. One example, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" by James Wright, is a favorite of mine. Using

specific sensory details, Wright puts his readers into the hammock on the farm. As one of those readers, I can see the butterfly, feel the gentle breeze and warm sunshine, and hear the cowbells (278). By the time I get to the last line, I am so delighted by the scene that I can understand why Wright concludes, “I have wasted my life” (278), and I resolve to spend more days outside enjoying the beauty that surrounds me.

Another place poem that I love for similar reasons is “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver. Through this poem, Oliver uses the experience of strolling through fields and finding a grasshopper to contemplate the Creator and finding one’s purpose in life (330). The poem gives me permission to enjoy long walks and contemplate small finds such a grasshoppers and poppies and pinecones and chickadees which may lead me to talk with God and worship Him.

One thing I love about both Wright’s and Oliver’s poems is that though both poems create “the surprise of discovery, which can become the revelation of truth” (Raab 133), both also are simple, straightforward, and easy to understand. Kooser says, “A poet who writes poetry that doesn’t require explanation, who writes clear and accessible poems, is of little use to critics building their own careers as interpreters. But a clear and accessible poem can be of use to an everyday reader” (2). When poetry is too cryptic, everyday readers will give up. Rather than puzzle people with my poetry, I want to give them pleasant experiences. Like Wright and Oliver, I want to write poems that are “clear and accessible.” I want my readers to understand the words, so they can get caught up in the scene. I hope, then, that as they begin to understand the experience, the meaning will emerge as a gift to heart and mind.

Beyond that, I hope to use my knowledge of Whidbey Island to help my readers grasp more than what can be seen and heard or touched, smelled, or tasted in this place. I want to invite them to form a connection. This is the unique contribution of poetry, more than expressing

emotion or creating an experience. Poems are conduits for connection: the writer to the reader through place, time, events, and people—and if the writer knows God as Creator and Savior, ultimately the connection leads to Him.

Significance to Me as a Christian Scholar

As I study Whidbey Island, seeking subjects for poems, I do so through the filter of God as Creator. He made Whidbey Island and everything on it. This knowledge reveals itself through many of my poems whether I have stated it clearly or not. Cynthia Marie Hoffman says, "We write (and read) in order to discover new things about ourselves and our world" (12). As I create new poems, I am gaining an appreciation for my God-given earthly home while anticipating eternity in my Christ-prepared heavenly home. I believe my collection will convey this to my readers.

First Kings 4:29-34 tells of King Solomon's wisdom that was "greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt" (*New International Version*, 1 Kings 4:30). The passage says, "He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kings 4:33-34). This tells me there is value in learning about the part of His Creation God has placed me in for now and in sharing my discoveries with others.

But the greatest value comes from letting those discoveries point others to God. "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Rom. 1:22). Without any help from me, Creation will speak of God to those who will

listen. Yet most people don't pay any attention. If I can craft poems that draw attention to God's work, I offer my poetry in service to God. Percy Bysshe Shelley says, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (90). By this, I believe he means that poets influence people in subtle, yet powerful, ways. I pray my poems, as a collection, will influence people to consider their place in this world and their position before God.

Conclusion

I have lived in many places and have visited even more. It would have been fun to have done this in each one. Maybe someday I will revisit some of these spaces in person or through journals, pictures, and published texts. After all, bell hooks wrote Appalachian Elegy as a "return to" her "native place" (5). Now that I have finished this project, though, I have a collection of word photos to savor and share: a chronicle of discoveries delightful, daring, and, sometimes, mundane—simple, poignant, complicated, beautiful, and true. I know the process has been meaningful for me; now I pray the result will offer meaning to those who read this work.

Critical Paper

Introduction

The creation of a place poem involves a process: a not-quite-linear journey from the poet's relationship with a place to an enticing new discovery to a representation of that discovery in the form of a poem. What starts in place ends in poetry, but every poem's journey to completion is fluid and unique. Essential elements along the way may present themselves in random order. Yet inspiration, detail, and form must emerge through the process. Accurately portraying the nature of a place through poetry requires inspired passion, diligent research, and precise presentation. Successfully combining these elements will result in poetry that leads readers into an experience of the poet's place.

Passion

To share an experience of a place with readers, poets must first experience a deep connection to that place themselves. Something about the poet's location must create a drive within the poet to create a written work that expresses intention, emotion, and thought. This drive is not hard to find because the places people inhabit are more than points on a map where those people happen to live. People interact with their spaces and develop relationships with them just as they develop relationships with people. Edward Casey, author of *Fate of Place*, says, "Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced" (x). Poets who write about their places reveal the truth of this through their work. Their passion inspires their poetry. The *Merriam-Webster*

Dictionary defines “inspire” as “to exert an animating, enlivening, or exalting influence on.” Inspiration gives poetry its life.

The Psychology of Place Poetry

In place poetry, this inspiration comes from the relationship between poet and place. Just as our relationships with parents, siblings, and friends help us to define ourselves, our relationship with place—its landscape, community, history, and culture—does the same. This makes place and all that goes with it a significant subject for poets and other writers. Casey says, “Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place” (x). This suggests that if place is essential to our existence, the place where we are is a part of our identity.

The poetry of Charles Causley, a British poet, writer, and schoolteacher, provides evidence of this. According to researcher Andrew Tate, Causley lived his whole life in one town—Launceston, Cornwall, and six years of military service were the only exception (75). As a result, “his poetry is frequently drawn to the in-between spaces of melancholic leave-taking and return; and his writing is fascinated by itinerant characters, prodigal sons (and uncles), who occasionally find their way home” (76). Though Causley was clearly attached to his hometown, time away may have created a need to write about the experience, to explore its impact and meaning. Many of Causley’s poems focus on foreign landscapes and home as he remembered it while he was away (83). Tate concludes that Causley’s work reveals he spent his lengthy career as a poet “wrestling with the ambiguities of belonging” (87). Perhaps Causley felt he belonged to Launceston until leaving for a time changed him. He spent his life trying to find welcome in his

place again. This longing to reassert his claim on Launceston as part of his identity revealed itself through his poetry.

Sean Prentiss is another poet who has found his identity in place. On revising "The Constellations of Slate Belt, Pennsylvania," he says, "Though the sections worked, I longed to wed those two physical spaces together because Slate Belt was and is a part of me" (42). He continues, "Another round of revisions heightened regionality. I wanted readers to experience in eighteen lines my 'Slate Belt'" (43). Because he thinks of his hometown as a part of himself, he identifies it as his possession, or at least he identifies his perception of the town as his. Prentiss was inspired to write the poem so his readers could share the experience of Slate Belt with him and perhaps through that experience also get to know something about him as a person.

Because poets belong to their places (or long to do so) and sometimes believe their places belong to them, those places often inspire their poetry. Poets write to share their ideas about whatever they experience: what they see, hear, taste, touch, smell, think, and feel about everything they notice all around them. Everything they think, feel, and sense happens within their place. Therefore, poet, place, and poem are connected, always revealing something of each other. The relationship between poet and place inspires poetry.

The Purposes of Place Poetry

Through the ages, poets such as Causley and Prentiss have revealed many reasons for writing poems of place. Some write to communicate their feelings about home. Some write to proclaim the value of their way of life. Some write to honor and affirm history, community, or culture. Some write to showcase God's Creation and ongoing work in their small corner of his

big world. Some write simply to entertain. All find something inspiring about a place and choose to place it on exhibition through their poetry.

For example, American poet bell hooks wrote *Appalachian Elegy* to claim her heritage and to remind people of those who have been forgotten (5). She tells of going away to college where "faraway outsiders" assumed that only "poor white people" populated Appalachia (5). Of this, hooks says, "No wonder then that black folks who cherish our past, the independence that characterized our backwoods ancestors, seek to recover and restore their history, their legacy" (3). hooks wrote to "lament the pain of slavery, the pain of having no voice" (7). Her poems memorialize and stake a flag upon the place she calls home.

J. Patrick Lewis, former U.S. Children's Poet Laureate, identifies several motives for writing place poetry in his compilation, *The Poetry of US.* Lewis says, "This book is a cross-country trip across Route 66, or an invigorating hike on the Appalachian Trail. It offers its pleasures vicariously . . . Transported by this express train of words, you will get a sense of the breadth and depth of the head and the heart of America" (5). The poems celebrate similarities, differences, and distinguishing features region by region, across the land, giving readers impressions of cities, states, and the country. They help readers to celebrate, mourn, become curious, experience wonder, and gain knowledge of the United States of America.

In *Prose Poetry,* authors Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton identify another motive for place poetry. They say, "Whitman was born in a fairly sparsely populated Long Island in 1819, and he witnessed—along with numerous other nineteenth-century writers, including Baudelaire in a rapidly developing Paris—the environment of his childhood being irrevocably changed" (60). According to Hetherington and Atherton, many poets since that time have responded to changes in their environments such as urbanization with doubt, uncertainty, and

grief (61-62). Perhaps Whitman, Baudelaire, and others like them wrote to capture a moment in time, knowing the future would be different from the familiar world slipping into the past.

Other poets believe the world is becoming too homogenous; they write to exalt the exceptional. Casey says, “The encroachment of an indifferent sameness-of-place on a global scale—to the point where at times you cannot be sure which city you are in, given the overwhelming architectural and commercial uniformity of many cities—makes the human subject long for a diversity of places” (xiv). He goes on to suggest that this creates a desire to prove distinction. When the unique features of their environments call to poets, they respond through poetry.

Finally, John Donne wrote to reveal the voice of God as he recognized it all around him. The following prayer, rendered poetically for modern readers, reveals Donne’s awareness of God:

> O ETERNAL AND MOST GRACIOUS GOD, you have spoken to us in many ways; first in the voice of nature, which speaks to our hearts, and then in your Word, which speaks to our ears. Yet you have also spoken in the speech of speechless creatures, such as Balaam’s ass (Numbers 22:28); and in the speech of unbelievers, such as in Pilate’s confession (Matthew 27:24); and even in the devil himself, who recognized and addressed your Son (Luke 4:5). (Yancey and Donne 84-85)

Poets, like Donne, who follow God, find him in their place and reveal his presence through their work.

All places have similarities and differences regarding landscape, plant and animal life, history, and culture. Place poetry gives poets a forum to voice what they love about spaces they encounter on trips and places they call home. They invite readers to relate to the familiar while

experiencing awe and wonder toward details not part of their knowledge of this world. Poems of place are tributes to the spaces poets honor, affirm, and love much like romantic poems are tributes to the people poets adore.

The Essence of Place Poetry

The best place poems, however, do more than pay tribute. They create meaning regarding a place; they influence perception. William Baer, author of *Writing Metrical Poetry*, says, "Great poetry is universally respected for its power to affect its readers and even to change their lives" (3). Great place poetry enriches readers with a growing understanding of this world and those who live here. In the introduction to *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry*, Neal Alexander and David Cooper say, "If place can be defined as a spatial location invested with human meaning, then the poetics of place refers to the ways in which such meanings are produced, understood and contested in literary texts" (5). In other words, though a poet may set out to give the reader an experience of a place, in doing so, the poet is infusing the poem with the poet's perceived meaning of that place.

For instance, in her essay, "Claiming Place: Robert Frost and Jesse Stuart," Paula Kopacz identifies poets Robert Frost, from New England, and Jesse Stuart, from Appalachia, as "successful regional poets" (1). She believes these men shared a "deep and mutual appreciation of the aesthetics of place as an important part of their artistic production and success" (2). Though Frost was skilled in using his environment to create compelling imagery (3), Kopacz says, "Stuart is unashamedly in love with the land, not because it triggers his imagination, but for its genuine beauty. His appreciation runs in the tradition of Whitman as namer and cataloguer, and of Emerson and Thoreau in sanctity" (4). Regardless, both poets "use their intimate

knowledge of place and character" to strike "the reader with the hard edge of truth about what it means to be human" (10). Both found a higher meaning within their space and used their surroundings to help readers grasp something more.

This is something all poets who write about places must strive to do. Finding a higher meaning and helping readers grasp it enhances both poem and place. According to Alexander and Cooper, "The Greek word *poiesis* describes creative or artistic production . . . The idea of *poiesis* should also remind us that places do not simply exist but are made or remade by forces and processes that are at once historical, social and cultural" (5). As poets work to represent their places with precision and accuracy, they also add "historical, social and cultural" value to the places they write about—they draw it out for others to see and appreciate. They add the meaning that comes from their perception as individuals and inhabitants of the place.

Prentiss provides an example through a description of his revision process for "The Constellations of Slate Belt, Pennsylvania": "This poem was written about a town ignored because it offers little to the outer world. Slate Belt is a weary downtown, crumbling rock hills, and backroads winding through cornfields. Thirty taverns served Yuengling to its 6,000 residents. So, I added references that heighten the idea of Slate Belt not having constellations telling our tales" (43). Prentiss perceived his town as ignored and weary, as a place that had little to offer. He constructed his poem to convey this perception to his readers. Other inhabitants may see the town differently, but Prentiss's poem is now a part of the town's history, culture, and legacy. If those who differ object, they can write their own poems to help readers share their experience of Slate Belt. According to Alexander and Cooper, "By studying specific places and the literature that comes out of them, scholars have learned that not only do places influence

literature, but also literature influences perception of place" (1). Poetry of place not only represents a place, but it also influences what readers believe to be its truth.

The Inspiration for Place Poetry

Because research and inspiration work closely together in the mind of a poet, sometimes it is hard to determine which comes first. Sometimes the poet must conduct research to find inspiration. Sometimes inspiration leads to a search for more information. In the case of place poetry, however, it is the act of being in the place that inspires the ideas that eventually become poems. Philip Gerard, author of *The Art of Creative Research,* says, "The process of research begins with the act of lifting up your eyes and looking out at the world, of paying attention and noticing, of listening alertly, of practicing the habit of inquiry and investigation of common things that leads to uncommon discoveries" (19). Such "research" starts with the poet living in the place, interacting with its people daily, participating in its cultures. This immersion is research of a sort, but it is also the initial inspiration for all poetry of place. And if this inspiration or insight is something the poet feels passionate about, it will be the thing that causes the poem to resonate in its readers' hearts.

Robert Frost found inspiration for many of his poems while taking walks. His poem "Pea Brush" begins, "I walked down alone Sunday after church" (Frost 36). Likewise, "Acquainted with the Night" begins, "I have been one acquainted with the night./I have walked out in rain—and back in rain" (19). Many of Frost's poems start in such a way. Out walking or riding, he would encounter something of interest and create a poem.

Frost's friend Hyde Cox witnessed this. In the forward to one of Frost's collections, Cox says, "In twenty years I have had many adventures with Robert Frost, and I have walked many

miles with him—always in conversation, entertaining ideas: in the hills of Vermont; and by the sea in Massachusetts; and in the streets of towns from Florida to Maine. We have outwalked the furthest city light" (Frost 9-10). Frost did not just walk. He observed. He noted. He experienced. He made discoveries. His discoveries became the subjects of his poetry. Of this Cox says, "[Frost] has said that the writing of a poem and the reading of it have this in common: they are both little voyages of discovery. He also says that for him a poem begins in delight; and the delight he speaks of is like the delight of discovery" (7). To create poetry, Frost went out into his world, discovered something that inspired him, then wrote to share his impressions with others.

Other notable poets also recommend paying attention to a place. Award-winning poet Jane Hirshfield says, "What we cannot do with the powers of self alone, the world's insects, branches, and birds sometimes come to assist" (26). U.S. Poet Laureate 2004-2006 Ted Kooser says, "The most effective poetry is not likely to be built from a sweeping look at an enormous panorama. It will more likely be found in watching a dog sniff a button" (95). Opening one's back door to find a button buck in the yard or hummingbirds flying about the crocosmia like tiny fairies inspires poetry. Such experiences and observations lead to discoveries and wonders that inspire poems of place.

But they will only do so if the writer is paying attention. Cox says, "We all speak of having ideas but entertaining them is an art. You have to invite them in and make them feel at home—as you do company—while you get to know them, to see if you want to know them better" (Frost 9). Mark Strand, one of the authors of *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* also suggests that writers have conversations with their ideas—their histories and their everyday encounters: "Poetry is shown to be, as it always has been, a process, as well as a product. A great part of that process is the poet's interior conversation with a possessed and

dispossessed formal past, and also with a great exterior discourse" (Strand and Boland xv-xvi). According to Kooser, this is where memory and imagination get involved in a poem's construction, "While we're at our desks writing and revising, we work from memory and the imagination, even though we may be writing about a parade of red ants we watched just a few moments before, a few feet from our back door. Memory is memory, and imagination is in part the reassembly of things we remember" (73). In other words, once experiences and observations lead to discoveries that inspire, the poet uses memory and imagination to process ideas in a way that allows the conversation within to become a written expression for readers to take in.

Research

If inspiration gives poetry its life, research helps the poet discover and draw out its character. Immersion, getting involved in every aspect of a place and paying attention to details as one does, is a primary source, one that creates inspired passion. But there are ways to gain even more knowledge of a place for the purpose of developing poetry. Gerard says, "The true role of research is to help you discover what can be known about something, which can then shape how you think about it and value it—and ultimately how you explore its meaning in words" (18). Conducting research about a place that a person knows well, the place a person considers home, can help that person to gain new insight and appreciation. Just as there is always more to learn about individual people, there is always more to learn about the place where one lives. In doing so, poets add an essential layer to their work.

The Contribution of History

Research into the history of a place, for example, may change the direction of poems in process. This research is like studying one's family tree to discover ancestry and heritage. A place's history is a part of its identity and can make an intriguing contribution to its poetry. For example, a poet standing at the top of the bluff at Ebey's Landing in Coupeville, WA, may be inspired to create a poem about the 360° view, but when that same poet learns that Whidbey Island's first permanent settler, Colonel Isaac N. Ebey, lived and died on the land that is part of that view (Kellogg 24), the poem will gain crucial meaning. Most libraries have collections of local literature for research of this kind. Some of this literature is available for personal use while some must be viewed on the premises. Either way, this literature is a source of a place's history, tradition, and culture. Reading it can help a poet develop ideas.

Historical research can also inspire new ideas. Consider this quotation from *A History of Whidbey's Island,* available through Sno-Isle Libraries thanks to the Island County Historical Society: "Alas, the grey timber wolves of Whidbey are no more. Their reign of terror over early white settlers came to an end after they treed a doctor for carrying asafetida and removed the tail of Sam D. Howe's horse" (Kellogg 21). According to the account, the wolves also stole young stock, easy prey, from farmers (21). Area hunters solved the problem by lacing leftover parts of deer carcasses with strychnine until the ravenous wolves died off (21). With a little bit of research to learn what asafetida is, the symptoms of strychnine poisoning, and whether the wolves suffered, a poet could write an elegy to the grey timber wolves of Whidbey or another such work to commemorate a mostly forgotten element of the island's history.

Historical societies and local museums can also give poets information for developing place poems. Some museums and sites of historical interest even have volunteers and educators

present to answer visitors' questions in person. Fort Casey near Coupeville, WA, for example, invites veterans to walk the grounds, making themselves available to tell visitors about the fort's features and history. Gerard says, "If you're going to be in an interesting place for other reasons, take advantage of the chance to find its stories" (12). Such stories give places distinction; therefore, they can help poets accurately portray the nature of those places. The bluff at Ebey's Landing may be comparable to bluffs in other parts of the world, but it's the only bluff where Whidbey Island's first permanent settler died.

The Contribution of Culture

Just as a place's history gives it distinction, so do its community events, issues, landmarks, and popular hangout spots. Such are part of a place's identity; they give it the character for which it's known. An account of Boston, for example, must include its annual marathon just as an account of Pasadena must include the Tournament of Roses Parade. Visitors to St. Louis, go to see its Gateway Arch. Tourists in Chicago stop to try its pizza style.

Someone who has lived in a place will know of such things without doing research, but there are sources available to remind and update. For example, when the Whidbey Island Cider Festival returned after the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Whidbey News-Times* reported, "As the air gets crisp and the leaves begin to die, the Whidbey Island Cider Festival prepares to end its four-year-long hibernation and bring back the flavors of fall in the name of environmental restoration" (Loi). Sources of such headlines and stories include newspapers, internet news sources, a poet's local chamber of commerce, city websites, tourist centers, and social media. The chamber of commerce may provide a list of annual events and their dates for the current year. City websites offer press releases and other announcements of significance. Tourist centers highlight what's

available to see. Social media is a source of local businesses, groups, and happenings with insight into people's opinions of these. These sources reveal the personality of a place which can help poets incorporate that personality into their work.

The Contribution of Witnesses

Interviews can also help poets build stronger poems. Talking with members of the community can help poets present all sides of an issue in a political poem or learn what life was like before they arrived in a town. Interviews may yield entertaining stories to help a poet present a favorite community spot in a unique way. With a little imagination, an amusing story about someone else's interesting encounter on a hiking trail can become a fun narrative poem, with permission, of course. This is especially true for poets who know the area well and, therefore, have plenty of concrete detail to fuel that imagination. Elderly residents can tell the stories of how landmarks were built or how annual community events came to become beloved traditions. These are the stories that myths and legends come from. Poets may want to validate information before turning it into a poem for the public to read, but memories shared are treasures and the resulting poems may become community keepsakes.

The point is that poets do not have to rely on their own memories or experiences for information regarding the place where they live. In fact, their poems will benefit from the additional stories, facts, and details gained through every kind of research. Christopher Salerno and Kelsea Habecker, authors of *How to Write Poetry: A Guided Journal with Prompts* say, "The advice to 'write what you know' is important, but equally important is the ability to call upon, or explore, that which you don't know. A poem can offer discovery for the reader, but a poem is also an opportunity for the writer to learn something new about themselves or the world

around them" (1). Research into sources all around will yield discoveries that make poems better able to lead readers into the experience of a place.

Presentation

Once the research is done, poets must make choices about the most meaningful way to present what they have learned. They must consider how to reach their readers, or their work may be ignored. Baer says, "As for entertainment, this is another term that makes many modern writers nervous, but it's a simple fact that if one's work doesn't entertain its readers in some way, it will soon be unread and forgotten" (2). In other words, though many poets may prefer to identify nobler intentions for their poems than entertainment, they still have to find a way to capture and hold the reader's attention. Their poems must please, surprise, or otherwise entertain their audience. If a poem is a work of art, just as a photograph, painting, movie, sketch, or sculpture is a work of art, the reader's imagination is the poet's canvas, screen, or pedestal. The poet's job is to activate the reader's imagination through a skillful use of words.

The Challenge of Presentation

Successfully transmitting the poet's vision to the reader is the challenge of place poetry. Inspired by fresh insight nurtured by observation, experience, and imagination, the poet longs to portray the nature of a place accurately. Diligent research can bring or enhance such insight while contributing to the effectiveness of the poem which the poet will frame as a photograph, display on screen as a movie, or place on a pedestal as a sculpture within the reader's mind. Essentially, poets must start with an idea, consider ways to present it to the reader, find concrete

details to give it substance and dimension, and choose the form that showcases it in the most effective way.

But doing so usually involves a struggle within the poet's mind. American poet and essayist Lyn Hejinian says, "Children objectify language when they render it their plaything, in jokes, puns, and riddles, or in glossolaliac changes and rhymes. They discover that words are not equal to the world, that a shift, analogous to parallax in photography, occurs between things (events, ideas, objects) and the words for them—a displacement that leaves a gap" (49). It's this gap that causes the struggle. Just as photographers struggle to replicate their subjects on film in the exact way they see them, the just right words to represent a sight or experience can elude someone who is attempting to give an account. Hejinian says, "We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things—and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so" (56). But as artists such as photographers or writers work diligently to close that gap between their impressions of the world and the words they use to convey those impressions to others, their delight in the process increases and their suffering abates. The result is a pleasing work of art, not an exact representation of its subject yet something that carries its own value. Of this process in poetry, Jane Hirschfield says, "Words become 'poem' when they start to carry some sense of news and of new destination, when thought's slope and music start to steepen" (24). In essence, the work becomes relevant when it offers meaning of its own.

The Choices of Presentation

Every decision in a poem's construction carries a weight of potential meaning. Even if the poet hadn't intended it, diligent readers will consider the why's of every word, punctuation

mark, capital letter, and line break. Kooser says, “I never come upon an ampersand in a poem that doesn’t hang me up for just an instant while I wonder why the poet decided to use it” (66). Poets don’t want their readers to agonize over the reasoning behind word and form choices; they want readers to receive the intended message of each poem or to feel they have experienced something of the place where the poem is set. Hejinian says, “The act of writing is a process of improvisation within a framework (form) of intention” (3). Craft decisions are meant to support the poems and allow their images to shine.

Determining Form

For example, poets can choose from many forms, but each form will present the poem in a unique way. Form is more than meter, rhyme, and number of lines. Form itself communicates something. Hejinian says, “Writing’s forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics—they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work’s motion” (42). If you change the form, you change the poem’s meaning. Experts have even shown that readers may prefer one version of a prose poem to another if different publishers adjust the poem’s shape to accommodate page size (Hetherington and Atherton 90). What seems like an inconsequential change may still impact a poem’s meaning. Perhaps this is why Robert Hass, author of *A Little Book on Form*, defines form as “the way the poem embodies the energy of the gesture of its making” (3). Form does more than showcase a poem; form contains the message in a masterful way.

In other words, form helps poets utilize other elements of the craft to highlight the message of the poem. Hass says, “The idea of form contains some notion of measure. The things to be measured in poems might be syllables, words, stressed and unstressed syllables, lines, even

syntactical structures" (111). There are received forms and experimental forms. There are hybrid forms, such as the Haibun. But free verse and prose poetry are forms as well in the sense that they represent the poet's choice of structure. Kooser says, "Form is an integral part of any art because art affirms order, but the form you choose doesn't have to be somebody else's form. It can be yours" (48). What matters is choosing the structure that gives the poem the best support.

Different poets approach this decision in different ways. Hass, for example, recommends "starting with one line as the basic gesture of a poem, and then looking at two lines and their relation to each other as a form or a proposition of form, and then three lines as another, and four lines—two sets of two—as still another, inside an idea that from these basic forms all the others could be generated" (1). Poet Joe Wilkins says, "I usually draft in couplets (you can't hide anything in couplets, all that white space forces you to interrogate every syllable)" (18). William Carlos Williams, a modernist, experimented with two-line stanzas early in his career (Hass 48). "He also used [couplet stanzas] in the 1930's for small poems that dole out perceptions in a way that creates the effect of a snapshot" (49). These poets demonstrate that the idea is to start writing to see what form begins to develop then build the poem according to that form from there.

Some forms, however, have a history or tradition that makes them especially appropriate for certain kinds of content. For example, some say that the sonnet resembles a human face (Hass 122). Therefore, writing a sonnet is like gazing into someone's eyes to declare one's love or peering intensely to argue one's case (122). A sonnet is also a good choice for worship. Walt Whitman's "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" may have been the first free verse sonnet (128), showing how poets can adapt such forms to meet their poem's needs.

The Haiku is another example of a poem especially appropriate for certain kinds of content. Of the traditional form, the Academy of American Poets says, "Often focusing on

images from nature, haiku emphasizes simplicity, intensity, and directness of expression." Over time, poets have begun experimenting with non-traditional combinations of lines and syllables. "However, the philosophy of haiku has been preserved: the focus on a brief moment in time; a use of provocative, colorful images; an ability to be read in one breath; and a sense of sudden enlightenment" (Academy of American Poets). That makes this form perfect for the poet who sees something unexpected, perhaps while opening an outer door or rounding a corner on a walk. Something that makes the poet think, "Whoa! That's amazing!" or "What was that?!" is a good candidate for haiku which was originally designed to give that exact impression to its readers.

Because of its shape, the prose poem can be seen either as a snapshot or the writing on a postcard. Quoted in *Prose Poetry*, Abigail Beckel says that the prose poem "with its shameless, joyful borrowing of craft and conceits from other types of poetry, other genres, and even everyday language encounters like letters, emails, conversations, lists, and questionnaires, makes it particularly well suited to techniques such as epistolary and ekphrastic writing" (Hetherington and Atherton 237). If one can imagine writing a note about an experience to a friend or describing a view with the details of a snapshot, a prose poem can help one present the idea that way.

There are many other forms to consider, but the point is that understanding how different forms came into existence and how other poets have used them through history can help contemporary poets choose the right structures for their work. Poets may choose to use them in a traditional manner or not, but information regarding forms can help them choose with purpose and intent just as a painter chooses a canvas, colors, and brush. Kooser says, "Well, there are no *should* or *should nots* in writing poetry. You can do whatever you feel like doing, pants on or

pants off. Part of the joy of writing, or of practicing any art, comes from the freedom to choose" (35). Knowledge gives poets more to freely choose from.

Considering Genre

The same concept can be applied to a poem's genre. Harvard University's "Glossary of Poetic Genres" explains the difference between form and genre: "Whereas a 'form' defines the way a poem arranges sounds, rhythms, or its appearance on the page, 'genre' is something like the poem's style." This is why an elegy, a lament for something lost (Strand and Boland 167), could be an appropriate choice for a poem about the destruction of the timber wolves on Whidbey Island or for a collection of poems regarding a part of Kentucky "ravaged by war and all human conditions that are like war" (hooks 7). Genre refers to the poem's content, but it can be contained in many forms.

Ekphrastic poetry is a genre well suited to descriptions of elements of place. Harvard University's "Glossary of Poetic Genres" says, "Originally a description of any kind, 'ekphrasis' is now almost exclusively applied to the poetic description of a work of art." Yet our Creator, by definition, is an artist, therefore, a poetic description of anything he has made is ekphrastic. Keeping this in mind in the creation of a poem will motivate the poet to present the description in a manner that cannot help but honor God.

Likewise, lyric poems, "brief poems that emphasize musical qualities" ("Glossary of Poetic Genres"), are good choices for poems of praise, worship, or wonder. When something about the poet's place leads to thoughts of God, lyric poems, which could include hymns or psalms, can help the poet lead the reader to share the experience.

As with forms, there are several other genres for a poet to consider such as narrative, epic, romantic, dramatic, and pastoral. A narrative poem can be used to tell the story of a community event (Salerno and Habecker 85). A pastoral poem can set a rural scene (Strand and Boland 207). A growing knowledge of such possibilities, their history, and their current usage can give the poet direction for a poem in process: direction concerning relevant content and direction regarding form.

Utilizing Imagery

But form and genre only exist as a scaffolding for the carefully selected words that convey a poet's vision. To help readers feel as if they are experiencing a place, poems about places must contain vivid imagery and concrete detail. Salerno and Habecker (6) say, "Images resonate with readers and lend emotional and symbolic weight to a poem. As readers, we like to encounter images because they allow us to visualize the world on the page, tapping into our own memories or taking us places we've never been." Poets tap into their readers' memories by using the familiar to help them see, in their imaginations, places they may have yet to experience.

In *Rules for the Dance,* poet Mary Oliver says:

> Poetry is rich with objects of the natural world used as images, comparisons, or emblematic figures. The force of the physical world upon us—even in our 'civilized' state—is beyond measure, and it was even more so in Shakespeare's time, or the age of Keats, or even Frost. Thinking is an exercise that proceeds from experiencing, and the physical world is our arena of experience. We see, hear, smell, taste, touch—and begin the meditation. What is abstract, general, and philosophical is woven with the living fibers of grass, red roses, nightingales, snowy evenings, and dawns. (73)

As poets immerse themselves in the physical world and "begin the meditation," they find the details and imagery they need for their poems. Kooser recommends that poets use their "originating impulses" as metaphors in their poetry (134). That is, when what the poet sees makes the poet think of something else entirely, something that captures the poet's imagination, that is the basis for a metaphor. Recent anthologies of geographical poems reveal "that landscape serves an at least dual function for many poets: as a topic and tool, noun and verb, referent and representation" (Alexander and Cooper 3). For instance, when the mountains outside a poet's window remind the poet of God, those mountains become a metaphor to give readers insight about God. But when the poet uses the familiar process of setting up dominoes to fall to help readers envision a crocosmia bloom, dominoes function as figures to enhance the readers' experience. Sometimes the place becomes the metaphor to help a reader grasp something abstract, and sometimes the metaphor helps the reader conjure up images of the place.

Specifying Details

Conjuring up images of a place, for someone who has never been there, though, requires specificity. Salerno and Habecker say, "Writing about place is an opportunity to evoke the character of a location using your unique perspective. To capture the spirit of a place, a poet must rely on heightened imagery and sensory detail, on observation and insight" (126). To effectively transport a reader's imagination into a place, poems must include the specific names of plants, animals, landmarks, shops, and streets. Kooser says that such "unusual details give a poem authenticity—prove we were there" (105). If readers can believe the poet has been to the place, the readers' experience of the place through poetry will feel more complete. Wilkins says, "We're not just describing the world as poets, we're attempting to remake the world, make new

worlds" (18). He gives this example from "My Son Asks for the Story About When We Were Birds": "The first turn—really, the only turn in the first draft—came when I read on Wikipedia (I do let myself poke around Wikipedia while I'm writing) that birds generally have large hearts for their sizes and that they sleep fitfully" (18). This information helped Wilkins add "a bit of sadness, a bit of trouble" (18) to his poem which increased its authenticity.

CMarie Fuhrman made the same discovery while revising "Land Acknowledgment, Valley County, Idaho." She says, "The further I got in the poem, the more I realized that I had to have specific, current examples to keep the poem relevant, grounded, and relatable" (32-33). This shows that the research for a poem may not be done until the poet determines the work is as finished as it can be. Sometimes the poet has to revisit a site, walk a trail again, probe the internet, or return to the library in search of necessary detail. Such detail builds the body of the poem into something believable. It helps the reader experience the poet's reality.

Conclusion

Though the process is not linear, every place poem represents the poet's quest to experience, find, and select the elements necessary to create a tangible work that exudes the life and character of a place. Inspired passion, diligent research, and precise presentation are essential to the accurate portrayal of the nature of a place through poetry. Passion comes from the poet's experience of and connection to the place. Poets find inspiration in places they dwell in or visit that drives them to creatively express their passions and purposes in poetic form. Poets also conduct research to learn more about the elements of place that capture their attention, just as people learn more about each other to strengthen relationships. As poets struggle to turn impressions into words, they conduct more research for ideas and details that will enhance their

work. Finally, they select form, genre, imagery, and detail to produce a work of art. When successful, the resulting poem becomes an offering for the reader's imagination, one that will give the attentive reader a convincing experience of the poet's chosen place.

You Are Here: Experiencing Place through Poetry

Close to Home Encounters

Always There

I seek your sights ev'ry morning.
Survey landscape: harbor, air base,
Mainland, but not one mountain face.

Where are you? When are you coming?
One hundred years you'll stay away?
Show summits then for just one day?

With intention, are you hiding?
In clouds, fog, haze of wildfire smoke?
Is this a game to you? A joke?

But now you appear, sheltering.
Brigadoon beauty, our fortress,
Great wall between nation and us.

Coming out with the sun's rising,
Silhouettes against sky salmon
Ribboned with lavender-gray skin,

Bulwark latent for igniting.
Snow-drizzled Cascades from Baker,
To Shuksan, Glacier, and Rainier.

Always present, never failing—
Ever standing on the West Coast,
Safeguarding our island outpost.

Morning Dance

The seagulls swoop in, circling,
Ornaments on the skirts of
An ethereal ballerina.
Spiraling radially from her waist—
Swirling grace,
Their presence is the only proof
Of hers;
Their cries on the wind create
Calm music for her dance.

She twirls in her long, feathered tutu,
Hem circling the field, surrounded
By fir, hemlock, blackberry bramble,
And the school's chain-link fence
Within which the gulls land gently,
As the dancer drops
To her knees.

Synchronized,
Seagulls walk stately,
Socially distanced,
Snatching insects from blades of grass—
Bob, rise, step,
Bob, rise, step—
Enjoying center stage until

The dancer rises,
Seagull skirt swirling around her,
Baubles attached to tulle,
Swinging to the west, now
Swerving to the east—

Circling
Rising,
Soaring
Away.

Outside the Mudroom Door

I opened our mudroom door
to a hummingbird dancing
through sun-enlightened crocosmia,
and I longed for my Canon—
chose impression of presence instead,
froze in place.

Hummingbird hovered
in front of my face,
Hello!
then buzzed up, away,
among high branches
of Douglas fir.

Meanwhile, Panda pup
stalked baby brown bunny
like Snoopy sneaking
through tall grass toward
Linus' blanket.

As I scooped up my
seven-pound savage,
Bunny bolted
under blackberry brush.
"See you tomorrow,"
I said.

Putting my pet in the house,
I ran upstairs
for my camera,
Returned with hope of
hummingbird portraits,
But opened my door
to a young deer, instead,
surprised as I—
two strangers
claiming the same backyard
space.

His head graced, still,
with velvet antlers,
Button Buck grazed
on California lilacs
while I attempted
an impromptu photo shoot

hindered by too direct sun.

I think I heard Buck laugh at me, like
Bunny had laughed
at my dog.

Wind's Rampage

Without warning,
Wind swoops in inclined
To wind hammock 'round cedar.

It skips around the yard,
Tossing confetti blossoms—
Skips not one petal.

Yet it leaves new leaves,
Still strong,
Attached to red bud boughs.

Below, buoyant daffodil bows,
Bounces, bows—
Wind's subject forced to subject.

But tulip resists,
Objects with lily,
Both objects of Wind's wrath.

Once again, spring's presents
Are swept away
On Wind's prevailing presence.

Majestic

I open the mud room door
and find the button buck,
now grown,
antlers dusted with snow.

He looks at me,
majestic indifference.
I shrink; I built my house
in his backyard.

Whidbey Takeoff

Maple:
Airfoil-formed leaves,
Bouncing, trembling, straining—
Autumn-cleared for first, final flight.
Leaf fall.

Growler:
Airfoil-formed jet,
Bouncing, rumbling, straining—
Mav'rick cleared for flight after flight.
Up, roar!

Late Autumn Chickadees

Chickadees adorn
the small pine
by the pond
like ornamental
faerie lights,

perch on the maple
vine by my window
like leaves
now long
gone.

Snow Day

Button your coat.
Hold onto your hat.
Our rare snow flurries
are not toxic,
just crisp.
Get out there quick!

Shovel the walk;
scrape snow from the lawn.
Scrounge enough
to build one, small snowman.
Tomorrow,
he’ll be gone.

The Bear on SW Erie Street

A rare bear wandering about Whidbey has been sighted on SW Erie. Wide-eyed, I realize, that's only a few blocks from my street address. Will he find my backyard, I wonder, like raccoons, deer, and bunnies do? I put seven-pound Panda pup away. Protect her. Just in case. Then I grab my camera and switch to walking shoes. News alert notification on phone— "Oak Harbor PD warns: Don't get too close to that bear!" I hesitate. Hm. Bears run sixty to my six mph. I pack my zoom lens; post myself on the deck.

Woodpecker Warfare

We wake to machine gun fire
hitting our chimney of stainless steel.
I'm here! Get up! Get up now!
We groan, roll over.
The woodpecker fires again—
and again.

I take the dog outside,
hear drumming on the eaves
above my daughter's room.
Soon, she'll wake up to complain.
So I point and shoot
with my camera.
Got him!

The critter on my digital screen
bangs head on wood
with abandon.
Wood chips fly.
Downey, Hairy, Pileated:
all dwell on Whidbey,
for now,
as males in red berets
attract mates by pecking
holes in trees, our house,
creating homes for other creatures.

We have enough creatures
living in our house.

Inside I hear the drumming,
look up.
Bird peeps at me
through skylight,
tilts head,
pecks frame,
flies.

Yes, Walter Lantz,
wacky woodpecker
drumming resounds
like a laugh.
Keep taunting, Woody—
We'll discourage you yet.

Our Backyard

Summer's hammocks and outdoor toys,
Sunshine, swimsuits, and gleeful noise,
Sprinkler water on ev'ry face,
Bare feet through slick, green grass give chase.

Autumn's pinecones and falling leaves,
Cool winds, flannel, and longer sleeves,
Barred owls we hear but see rare trace.
Tall evergreens make sheltered space.

Winter's darkness and fire pit chats,
Crisp air, Marmots with scarves and hats,
Blankets of snow the ground embrace
While snowflakes hang from twigs like lace.

Spring's tulips, bunnies, dappled fawns,
Daily rain, jackets, lush, green lawns,
Hummingbird wings at lightning's pace,
Lengthening days grant sunlight's grace.

Autumn Passage

Fall vine maple limb
Holds lone gold leaf, veined copper,
Life work done. Let go.

Island Explorations

Dimensions Defined

Whidbey's dimensions defy definition
Much like its culture
Influenced by
Salish, Scandinavian,
Irish, and Dutch,
Artists and outdoor enthusiasts,
Civilians and Navy personnel,
Tourists, residents, progressives,
And preservationists.

On two things, these all agree:
The island is narrow.
The island is long.
Beyond that, the description
Gets murky—
Like mud flats at low tide.
Not even Island County Public Works
Nor the Planning & Community
Development Department
Can define Whidbey with precision.

For example, directional signs proclaim:
"Oak Harbor 10 Miles" from Coupeville,
From Oak Harbor, it's "Coupeville 8 Miles."
This discrepancy, though,
Is easily explained:
To Coupeville, it's downhill.

Surveys say:

From Deception Pass to Cultus Bay,
The island's length is thirty-five,
Or maybe,
Fifty-eight miles,
Depending on the source one consults.

Whidbey's widest point is ten
To twelve miles;
Its narrowest,
One to two.

In square miles,

The island's area
Is greater than one sixty-nine,
Less than two thirty-five—
Give or take a bit.

Likewise, the shoreline
Measures somewhere between
One forty-eight to
Two hundred miles.

Some claim Whidbey's defiance
Is due to tidal soil accretion.
Or erosion.
This means Whidbey's size
May change with the tide.
Embrace island logic.

This we know:

Forests north and south
Sandwich
Farmland and prairies.

That's Whidbey defined.

Driftwood Portraits

Agates, sea glass,
Stones, and shells,
Seaweed,
Stinging jellyfish,
Driftwood stacks
Unending
In arrangements
Ever-changing—
All entries in the artist's show.

Where does the driftwood come from?
Salt sea smoothed,
Sun-bleached and dried,
Until high tide
Piles it further
Up onto shore—
The ocean keeps on finding more.

An artist, collector,
A random conveyor of
All things that land in your mass—
Can you arrange
By intention
In ways you find pleasing?
Or only
Discard
The trash
From your depths?
I watch for clues,

Camera to eye, capturing
Each draft, each scene.
For next time,
These won't be the same.
With big breakers
Crashing,
Then gentle waves
Lapping,
The ocean revises its work.

Clams at Crescent Harbor

We walk out on the sand bar
        accessible only at low tide.
Seagulls soar above, away
from the eagle perched
        on a felled tree turned driftwood
                replanted in sand by sea—
a throne for this great guardian
        of the coast.

As we near the water's edge,
        water spurts up sudden,
                sprays our bare legs.
We jump; seek the source.
Bend.
Look.
There!
Holes in the sand.
We touch them—
        squirt!

Grandson runs.
Spurt,
        spurt,
                spurt—
behind him.
Clam spurt can't catch up.
He giggles.

His sister joins him.
Spurt,
        spurt,
                spurt—
Kid laughter erupts
Like clam spit
        from sand

I wonder—
Do the clams
laugh along?

Hiking, Hounding Bruiser

We approach the wildlife area
Bruiser frequents, warned
To give him space.
We want to hike
The Strawberry Point Preserve path.
A Bruiser sighting
Would be a bonus.

There! On the ridge
Among the high hemlock.
Wouldn't that be a glorious place
For him to appear?

We follow the packed dirt path
Over winding roots,
Around felled stumps,
Through strawberry plants and their runners,
Red huckleberry vines,
Ferns, and mushrooms of many kinds.

Point four miles to the meadow.
Bruiser, are you there?
Are you hiding near the Douglas fir,
Pretending to be a tree?
Not today.

Perhaps you're tossing the neighbor's
Bikes from your antlers
Or getting tangled
In boat buoy rope.

It's just as well.
A 1,000-pound bull elk in the wild
Would steal the breath from our lungs,
Terrify us statuesque.

Still, we will tiptoe in again,
Anticipate magnificent terror,
On another day.

Migrant Workers

Fields once full of
pumpkins, corn, and
sunflowers

Now host snow geese,
flocks of feathered
migrant workers

Clearing land
of leftovers
for spring.

Along Fort Nugent Road Just Outside Town

Alpacas penned with goats,
Lone cow, and free-range chickens
Producing free range chicken eggs,
Five dollars a dozen

Furry pigs. Furry pigs? Not sheep?
No, furry pigs with snouts:
Mangalica from Hungary
How'd you get here?

A calf in the field
Freshly pulled from its mother,
Struggling to rise to root,
Join other calves on the round hay mound
Surrounded by conscientious cows

Ducks on the pond, perfectly matched
Each mallard with a mate—
Still life on water

Eagle swooping up, no effort
To perch on the highest fir branch
Take in landscape's entirety
All he can see is his domain
And somehow, he seems worthy,
Unlike Yertl, who couldn't reach heights
Himself

Red hawk wings eclipse windshield,
Folding in just in time
To roll, dive disappear into brush
After prey I cannot see
With my not-hawk eyes

Three terriers tumbling
Off their farmhouse porch
In their haste to reach the road
To bark at passing cars
Like mine

Deer crossing the road
Without warning
Watch out! Or deer will hit you;
Yes, hit and run

Close call or close encounter
Cause of wonder

The Walk to Baby Island

From Saratoga, thirteen hundred feet
Between Whidbey and Baby Islands lie.
When Holmes Harbor recedes, these islands meet.

Muck in tide flats is known sandals to eat,
So stroll barefoot or step nimble and spry
From Saratoga, thirteen hundred feet.

A minus tide accomplishes this feat:
When new or full moon graces evening sky,
Then Holmes Harbor recedes, and islands meet.

View tide pool creatures, rocks, and shells replete,
Starfish and eelgrass in profuse supply
From Saratoga, thirteen hundred feet

To Baby Island, land mass bittersweet,
Shrinking with tide that forms its Whidbey tie.
When Holmes Harbor recedes, these islands meet.

Someday the Sound will Baby Island beat,
So give this miry jaunt a gallant try:
From Saratoga, thirteen hundred feet
Of Holmes Harbor recedes, so islands meet.

Arrows

The tops of the tallest
trees grow west
as the wind blows,

pointing to show
which way
the wind goes.

The Hike to Dugualla Bay

Four women hike the packed-dirt trail,
One local and her friends.
Flora encircles, closing in:
Mushrooms, ferns, vines,
Hemlock, and pines.

“Should we watch for bears?”
“There are no bears on Whidbey.
Well, except for that one.”

“Do the homeless haven here?”
“We won’t encounter them on the trail.”
Step. Step. Step. Step.

“Beware of the axe murderer, though.”
“What?!”
Laughter bounces off the trees.

They reach the beach where the heron fish
And the otters wave
And the sun glitters on the water.

A bearded man approaches,
Backpack hanging off one shoulder,
Index finger to mouth.
He motions the group near.

Three huddle and quake,
Feet rooted like trees.
But one steps forward to meet her fate.
The man points up.
An eagle’s nest!

From Mist to Mainland

Tall pines emerge through mist,
Charcoal on gray,
Revealing true evergreen
Only on close approach.

Pines part to allow passage,
Showcase sun disguised.
The perfect white circle
Demands audience through fog
Dense from road to eternity.

Geese rise, synchronized, from the field
Cloaked in ethereal silver,
Circle like a school of fish
Swimming through damp droplets
Then land, huddle for warmth.

Clouds form under Deception Pass Bridge,
Hover just over the waters of Skagit Bay,
Leaving knowledge of these
To memory alone.

The road winds through moisture,
Destination Twin Bridges,
Where Cascades present themselves,
Stand tall, packed in cushions of cloud.

There, suddenly,
All is clear.

Spring Preview

We walked the harbor's boardwalk yesterday
When Spring banished the wind, the cold, the rain.
Bright Sun called, "People, come outside and play—

"Recharge reserves from winter's rav'nous drain."
The tide out, footprints led through muck to sea,
Around those mud mounds no one can explain.

My daughter longed to climb the live oak tree,
The one with branches long and low and sound.
But children filled its limbs, no space was free.

All swings held offspring, too, at our playground.
We walked past pulled by Goose, her leash in hand,
Her nose could not keep up, scents all around.

Seagulls by hundreds dug crabs from the sand.
But all at once, alert, they rose, took flight
"So strange," we thought, 'til Eagle swooped to land.

He stood, noble, as if it were his right
To take the beach from those who would be prey.
His wings outspread revealed he had the might.

Likewise, Winter swooped in; Spring flew away,
But we walked 'round the harbor anyway.

A Walk Across Deception Pass

The three-foot-wide sidewalk
seems to narrow as I skinny past
tourists, runners, and photographers,
the Puget Sound Basin half a football field
below on one side—
height dependent on the tide,
the roadway
with its steady stream of vehicles
at school-zone speed
on the other.
Windstorms have been known to sweep high-profile
vehicles across the barrier. Indentations
in the metal
evidence this.

A light breeze plays with my long hair.

Halfway across, I stop
and rest my hands on
the rail.
Ignoring people pushing past
behind me, I survey
Skagit Bay and its surroundings:
people collecting rocks on the beach;
fishing from the shore;
scrambling up and down rugged dirt paths
weaving through manzanita and gorse;
kayaks navigating currents;
seals and otters in the Sound basin;
eagles perched atop Douglas fir
atop the highest island peaks.
I've yet to see a dolphin
or an orca passing through,
though people testify
they do.

The couple standing next to me turns their back on the water,
smiling for a selfie
with the view. I wait
for them to finish, then we dance
around each other awkward—
strangers going different ways.

At Pass Island, I step with care

down steep concrete stairs,
circle under the bridge, and
climb steps to the west side
for my return trek.

Again, I stop halfway, this time
to watch a seal
watch people
from below. He dives.
We scour Sound, anticipate.
“There he is!” a spotter yells.
Eyes follow the finger to see
where the seal has emerged
at the base of Goose Island, and then
he submerges again.
I resume my walk.

On approach to Whidbey Island, I see
a group just ahead huddling,
heads bowed. Facing west,
a woman dressed dark
holds flowers to hang on the rail
above the water.
People squeeze around,
oblivious. Someone whispers,
“Are they taking wedding pictures?”
Sadly, no.
They memorialize something
quite different today.

Silently, I slip past, stepping
as close to the road as safely I can.
I stop a sacred distance beyond, breathing in
the whole 360°:
Whidbey, Skagit, Fidalgo, Juan’s Strait.
Beautiful, but deadly.
Hopeful, yet sad.
Inviting—showing teeth.
Commanding wonder—
and respect.

Irresistible Rocks

We meet the grands at the beach with new buckets and shovels for digging in sand. Instead, we all search for rocks. Smooth flat rocks for skipping—or creating ripples when our technique fails. Solid, sound rocks to stack on driftwood like Moana's chiefs did, cairns high on the hill.

Collectible rocks and the like, though, claim most of our afternoon:

Pebbles worn smooth,
    Left rough;
Agates, somewhat rare;
Sea glass—blue, amber, clear;
Erratics glaciers
    carried here,

Sandstone; feldspar;
    Granite,
In pink, grey, and white;
Driftwood—petrified; and
Composites speckled,
    spotted, striped.

The grands fill three buckets with treasures tossed out by the sea, glossed with water, calling, *Choose me! I'm shiny!*

Can we keep them, Mom?

You may each choose one. The grands select with care—and tears—hug us good-bye and go.

At home, Husband drops his jacket—*Thunk.* I pick it up. *Heavy?* He shrugs. I turn out pockets; find rocks.

Island Testimony

The island declares God's glory;
No deception there.
One Rock testifies of another.

Sunrise spews from mainland mountains,
Revealing red lava potential
Like Garry oak leaves in fall.

High tides engulf beaches
Building driftwood bulwark,
A frame around Whidbey
Enhanced by rocks revealed
Only when waters recede.

Earthquakes tremor, tremble
Every decade or so,
More frequently in recent days,
Shaking smiles as they surprise
The citizenry.

Majestic bald eagles, like sentries,
In highest hemlocks,
Keep bunnies at bay.
Gulls do the same with crabs
On the coast.

And yet,

Hummingbirds dance gentle
Amid the crocosmia
Setting up its blossoms
Like dominoes
To fall.

Bumbles bless the English lavender
That now calls Whidbey home.

New fawns emerge with
Tulips, daffodils, and crocus every spring—
All of Whidbey life testifying
To our Creator's ways.

Cultural Immersions

Creator's Creation, Creature and Muse

Artists climb Your mountains, sketch inspiration
For future canvas work in isolated studios,
Eclectic ambiance selected, their only company.

Photographers capture bald eagles, sea gulls,
Surf hitting shore debris, dredging more,
Sunrise, sunset, landscape ever new.

Woodcrafters transform found, fallen trees
To earrings, turned bowls, tables for tourists
To take when they go, transport Whidbey claim.

Sculptors, weavers, potters, jewelry makers:
The created creating, re-creating,
Their Creator's work their muse.

Ill-Fated Artwork

She sits, centered, in ten-foot square space, smack dab in the middle of Pioneer Way, blocked off for the annual event. Chalk pressed to asphalt with intention creates art, the street its canvas, from Dock to Hathaway. Pedestrians pause to watch, then walk on. The girl frames her work. White curlicues on vines surround the sun striped in sunset hues: pink and salmon, blue and grey.

Not for warmth, the girl wears a coat of chalk dust over bare legs, bare arms, smudged across her face, and melted into dampness on her neck. Continual motion has blended the coat's many colors murky grey; Sky's clouds darken to match. In growing shadow, the girl works with fury in frenzy, most likely futile this day.

Beside her, a mother and daughter draw dolphins in Puget Sound while another contestant captures Bruiser the Elk by the Farm Stand encircled in blackberry brambles. Children play at their own competition in front of the Wind & Tide Bookshop by Baby N Me where they color carefree—unaware of impending disaster.

The rain starts slowly, warning sprinkles. Judges heed the gesture, running with cameras to capture each masterpiece-in-progress before the downpour declares *Enough!* Washes dolphins, scribbles, sunset, Bruiser, barn, blackberries, and curlicues away. The children abandon chalk for water and, with faces turned up to receive it, dance, giggle, and play. Meanwhile, more serious artists avert eyes from crying colors and head home. As the historic district turns back to business, evidence of art clears the helpless canvas and settles in gutters lining the road.

Collecting her chalk, the girl half-smiles a sigh.

Whale Welcome

We're here to welcome the whales back to Whidbey Isle.
We're gonna march through the town. Gonna wave and smile.
We're dressed like sea creatures.
Grey whales are the features:
Breach now!

We're dressed like seaweed and starfish and mermaids fair.
Parade of orcas and ghost shrimp, lobsters to spare.
We're water protectors,
Obsessed with whale ventures:
Breach now!

We use our feet, ride in golf carts. We raise banners.
We ride on shoulders, in strollers; incite dancers.
The ghost shrimp are brimming,
The Sounders are swimming:
Breach now!

Please celebrate with our town as we march and cheer.
Follow us down to the beach where the whales appear.
Yearly, our hopes beckon
Whale pod visitation:
Breach now!

Please whales:
Breach now!

Sounders—
Breach now!

Church at the Beach

We parked at Emerald Auto, closed Sundays, and joined worshippers walking from three directions, funneling into a somewhat single line, moving steadily toward the beach. Around us, congregants from all over Oak Harbor carried backpacks, beach chairs, blankets. Led dogs on leashes. Pulled wagons carting coolers. Pushed strollers packed with kids and their gear. The haul was a long one but worthy; all beach parking put church, for the disabled, into reach. On approach, greeters gave instructions for accessing order of service via smartphone. Wide-eyed we walked through a portal of balloons, making entry knowing: "God will meet us here."

Approaching the site felt like entering Disney—What would we see? Hear? Who would show? We spread our blanket by the tree with branches removed like Giving Tree's, heart-encased initials carved on its weathered remains—subtle monument to our island's loves. The manicured landscaping around it guaranteed we could see. Stage before us. Ocean behind us. Seagulls above us. Crowds of people all around. Bees, too. I smiled to recognize the veteran I pass often on walks around town—the one on oxygen riding in the American flag-bearing wheelchair. Police foot patrols moving around sandy sanctuary outskirts doubled as greeters.

The sun on my back made me regret my long-sleeved shirt, but the breeze would have made me regret short sleeves just as fast. I inhaled the atmosphere: babies crying, laughing; sunhats flopping; bare feet sunning; ball caps; slight smell of smoke with haze of annual wildfire battle on the mainland; crocosmia going to seed—a promise for next year. Three-wheelers, bicycles, and golf carts, conveyances doubling as seats for the service. Pets joining their owners in worship which began: a mingling of modern praise choruses and abiding hymns followed by a blessing prayer for the coming new school year.

Wouldn't it be something if Jesus shows up, I thought, to feed our not quite 5,000 but still respectable crowd? Pastor Drew must have thought so too. Called everyone to turn to that text: Luke 9:10-17. The story of our humanity; God's sovereign care. Our family hadn't packed a lunch. We'd missed that memo, so I knew. We were going to have to go home or go hungry—but not before the message fed our souls. God is sufficient. Not only does He meet needs, He enables His children to do so, too. Through us, He makes His sufficiency known.

Sermon over, people formed two lines for baptism in galvanized garden tubs. I looked from the tubs to the ocean I would have chosen. Then, stomach rumbling, I turned my face toward home. Our family joined a third line forming fast, leading away from church at the beach. Back to Emerald Auto's parking. Home for lunch. Intermittent clapping, cheering followed as we journeyed toward sustenance, not so far that we would faint along the way. God knew. Our hearts filled with every cheer—another soul cleansed. In the name of the Father, Spirit, and Son. Jesus, we thank You. Amen

Nature's Keystone
after Anthony Heinz May

When a tree falls in the forest,
the snag begins to decompose;
becomes a nursery for new seedlings
and a shelter for birds, rodents, bugs;
then degrades into mulch to
enrich the forest floor.

Unless that tree, a western hemlock,
by the power of a windstorm,
happens to fall across a path
in the Price Sculpture Garden
where the works of nature
and human artists
converge and complement.

There, from intact trunk,
Blocks of debris spill
pixelated, swirling,
twirling to path's edge
cleared for passersby,
now participants in the work
which carries on across
the packed dirt walk,
embellished
with scattered,
stomped-in stones:

Nature's aestheticism
now enhanced
by a tree that exists
in transition—
nature to technology,
wholeness to pixelated parts—
way made through Creation
for the creature's
creativity.

Photobomb Plea

I've learned to smile and wave whenever
I drive over Deception Pass.
For who knows how many photos I'm bombing
as trembling tourists, fearful of height and motion,
attempt to capture views of east and west
from just a few steps in
on a single side?
Instead of finding the Strait of Juan de Fuca and
its island peaks in their photos,
they'll find me in my velvet red Jeep.

It's not that I mind being part of their memory.
I only wish
they'd put phone cameras
in pockets,
seize bravery with hand
on rail,
and walk across. I think:

You've come this far to see it, Friend.
Now see it!
Experience Puget Sound Basin from bald eagle vantage—
Watch currents carry canoes and playful creatures;
Feel breeze caused by traffic and wind;
Hear waves, birds, tourist chatter;
Taste salt on the air;
Inhale, eyes closed—breathe all in.
Let senses seal sojourn
in memory. Then
take pictures if you must.

Ferry Risk

The choice is yours:
To take a chance, hope for the best
On your 30-minute ferry ride to Mulkiteo
Or Port Townsend.

When all is well,
You'll watch for dolphins, orcas, otters, sea lions,
Take perfect pictures of the Sound scenery,
Or place a few pieces in jigsaw puzzles
Set out to entertain those who see Sound life daily.
Great fun when the weather is sleepy in sunshine,
        Chillaxed and content.

But watch out when she's riled.
She can force all ferries
        To stop.

If you've already crossed Admiralty Inlet
        Or the Saratoga Passage,
You'll be forced to drive home the long way—
Two to six hours depending on where
        Your ferry disembarked.
The weather will not care
That you were inconvenienced.
She may even relent once you're too far gone
        For turning around.

Worse yet, she may let you catch the ferry—
        For her own amusement.
Curious, playful, and unaware
        Of her own strength,
        Of her effect on you,
She'll catch your ferry in the act of crossing,
And bat it around
                And around,
Refuse to let it enter the slip to dock,
Leave it circling the Sound
        Until she tires of the game,
        Falls asleep,
        Lets you slip away home—
                Sweet relief.

To Create with Whidbey Island Rocks

Choose your canvas; comb the beach.
Pick up each smooth, flat basalt—
Round, oval, or heart surface—
Sandstone will suffice, no fault.

Paint with acrylic pens, one
Color done. When dried, one more,
Picture growing by layer,
Details building fair décor.

Seal to preserve from weather,
Then venture forth work to hide
In sight for local players
And tourist strayers in stride.

Daily check group Facebook page.
On that stage, your work will shine.
Joyful post anticipate:
Your found artwork's fate headline.

Cinematic Scape

Makers of films are fans of Whidbey Island
Landscape and villages of rustic charm.
Subtly, they slip our sites into their movies.
From real to image, Whidbey they've transformed.
We hesitate to tell their movie secrets
For fear of less'ning movie-goer thrill.

Yet *War of the Roses* gave viewers such thrill
When Roses met on Nantucket Island.
Coupeville on State Route 20 holds their secrets;
Highway was filmed in Langley with less charm.
Blood Money, Double Jeopardy too transformed
Whidbey's ideal spots for suspense movies.

Jenne Farm in Coupeville likewise graced the movies.
Director Ben Medina caused the thrill
When for *ECCO*, a spy flick, he once transformed
The Whidbey farmstead on his birth island.
Free Willy 2: The Adventure Home did charm;
Poignance enhanced by rustic isle secrets.

The Ring revealed Deception Pass's secrets:
It can draw horror, not just in movies.
But NAS Whidbey drew Hollywood's charm.
When *Top Gun: Maverick* actors got their thrill.
Pilots with Tom Cruise flew from Whidbey Island,
Cascade Mountains to rogue nation transformed.

Practical Magic a whole village transformed.
Coupeville's waterfront will keep no secrets.
Each fall, a celebration on the island
Attracts fans of such cult classic movies
Tourists at Little Red Hen Bakery thrill
To seek Verbena Botanical's charm.

Central Whidbey Café gave *Late Autumn* charm
When into Keystone Café it transformed.
Ebey's Landing and Ferry House achieved thrill,
Keeping *Snow Falling on Cedars'* secrets.
Midday Black Midnight Blue, rare for the movies,
Bent script honoring this unique island.

Filmmakers who scare, amaze, thrill, awe, and charm
Seek Whidbey Island spots quickly transformed

From real to scape through secrets of the movies.

Moonlight Walk at Midnight on Halloween

Streetlights flicker as wind,
More than a gentle breeze,
Threatens to knock out the power
Again.

A leftover length of toilet paper slips
From a swaying tree to
Tickle my face.
I slap it away, then slide forward
On something slick,
Regain my balance
Barely.

My flashlight reveals the yellow yolks
Of eggs slaughtered
On the sidewalk,
On a neighbor's dimly lit front door,
On the windshield of a curb-parked car,
And now, on the sole
Of my boot.

Pawing this boot on the grass
Like a pony, I
Look up as
A spider drops, determined,
From the streetlamp, pausing
In front of my face.
I stop, step back,
Slip around.

The wind carries all around me
The calls of barn owls
Hidden high in
Western hemlocks.
I'm too big to be owl prey, but
The bat that buzzes my ear is
A worry.

Has this night,
In fact, somehow,
Made all myth monsters
Real?

Island Coffee

Four Starbucks surround
Whidbey Coffee’s parking lot,
Spots forever full.

The Mystery of Big Foot

Called Big Foot or Sasquatch,
For stalkers he keeps watch.
No photographs please.

Shy of folk who seek him,
He hides where light is dim,
Careful no one sees.

Playful, he leaves one hint:
Strategic mud footprint.
Big Foot, King of Tease.

Evidence on Whidbey
Has legitimacy—
Researcher lives here.

Investigates sightings
Of Yeti-like beings;
Promotes fact, not fear.

Could Sasquatch swim Skagit?
Hide on island unmet?
Truth is somewhere near.

Inspiration Sensation

Just as little children mimic parents,
artists recreate their Creator's work.
A number, disproportionate to isle
population in world comparison,
has found its inspiration on this Rock,
Whidbey Island, environmental muse
for those who offer beauty to the world,
intimate invitation to receive
representation of inward meaning
found by artists and expressed outwardly.
Walk about Whidbey, watching for wonder,
waiting for discovery, and you, too,
may be compelled to industry incensed,
exalt Creator God through Whidbey art.

The Whidbey Island Dance Theatre Presents

Tchaikovsky's traditional Christmas ballet:
The Nutcracker
with a Whidbey Island twist.

Come see our annual production,
of more than thirty years—
the joint work of apprentice dancers
with recognized principals.
(Some learned to dance here.)

Experience a Winter's dream
of island travels told in tulle.

Watch mermaids swing on silks
of seaweed and perch on pearls
in an underwater kingdom of aerialists
who float as if by magic,
dance for Clara and her prince.

Admire fluttering flowers gracing
the enchanted realm of the one and only Faerie
Queen with her brave Forest King.

Witness these majestic rulers
welcome Madame Bumble and her cast
of critters (resembling costumed children:
experts of holiday sweetness, novices of dance).
Adorable additions to the Nutcracker tale
dance for Clara and her prince.

Snowflakes swirling, icicles twirling . . .
fierce dragon roaring, rat king dueling. . .
ice castle shimmering, secret cave hiding
deep in the Sound . . .

See all—and more—
in Langley for Christmas this year.

Historical Allusions

Ebey's Bluff 360° on a Clear Day

I climb the rustic stairway,
Beach to bluff—
Crumbling railway ties,
Peeking out of mud
And pebbles.
Crude handrails to hold.
Did Colonel Ebey himself build this?
Surely not.

Yet he did share this glorious,
Slow-turn view:

Olympic Mountains a swim across the Sound
Where mallards, gulls, otters, and driftwood float
Near shore.
Perrigo's Lagoon, a fragile thread
Enduring
Through recurring king tide threat.
How?
The forest shadowing the field
Where Ebey's head was found.
"One chief for another"
Reasoned
The Canadian tribe
That took his life.
Beyond the field still known as his
Stands Mount Baker. Imagine that!
Cascade and Olympic both
Visible by pivot in place
Or shift of eyes.
Ebey Road with farmhouses on either side, then
Another forest points back to the Olympics
Where a ferry now crosses the Sound.

Dutch Development

From island to island the Irish came,
Hoping to recover from farming blight.
Drawn to land fertile, support for tall trees,
They longed potato famine to reframe,
Set health, emaciated bodies, right,
Fill bellies and barns, coffers with monies.
They cleared the land of trees, planted their seeds
Then worked the land, determined, day and night.
The land refused to yield, their dreams did seize.
They found this island would not meet their needs.
Worries!

Decades later, the Dutch came to Whidbey
From land reclaimed from sea, transformed to farms.
Carolinas, Dakotas, Michigan
Did not provide desired quality.
Whidbey's description, though, held wanted charms.
And so, they took a chance and sailed again.
They knew what to do with farmland that floods—
With faith in God, frugality, strong arms
They built dikes like good Dutch men and women.
Produced first year, eight-thousand pounds of spuds.
Amen

The Ballad of the Grey Timber Wolves

Timber wolves, grey, once roamed Whidbey
In fierce packs on the prowl,
Their fearsome acts to procure food
Caused new settlers to howl.

Wolves chased the doctor up a tree
To take his “devil’s dung.”
Asafetida’s pungent scent:
They craved its taste on tongue.

Wolves stole the tail from Sam Howe’s horse,
Snatched livestock, favored prey.
Desp’rate, the farmers hatched a plot
To end the wolf-led fray.

They laced hunt waste with strychnine, strong;
The wolves could not resist.
Deer remains, free, they pounced upon,
And soon ceased to exist—

That is, on Whidbey Island, where
The settlers sighed relief,
Their families, livestock, pets now safe
From grey timber wolf grief.

The Wonder of Whidbey's One Elk

Iconic elk of Whidbey,
You emerged from Skagit Bay.
At Strawberry Point freely,
You found your sweet hideaway.
Lone elk of this, our milieu,
O Bruiser, we adore you.

You emerged from Skagit Bay,
Handsome bull elk, young and strong.
From your herd you strayed away;
Whidbey lured you from the throng.
Bruiser, are you a recluse?
Your motives, we can't deduce.

At Strawberry Point freely,
You rule the entire preserve—
Unchallenged territory,
No predators to unnerve.
Foliage for herbivore:
Apples, alder, shoots, and more.

You found your sweet hideaway,
Isolated habitat.
Antler issues, though, betray;
Send you into cross combat.
With garden gnomes you butt heads;
Captured tarps you leave in shreds

Lone elk of this, our milieu,
In Autumn, you seek a date,
Solitary life eschew,
Bugling to find a mate,
Raising concern island-wide
That our Bruiser needs a bride.

O Bruiser, we adore you,
Our own majestic legend.
Vagabond we hope to view
For years far past elk lifespan
In the forest, in the field,
On beach, your profile revealed.

Whidbey Institute: a Found Poem

Forested Chinook land
Regenerated from logging legacy,
Thick with white pines,
cedars, ferns,
hemlocks, great firs.

Fearful generations
purchase properties nearby—
Preserving powerful, silent beauty
from the devastation
of development.

Quality land will thrive:
respected, cherished—
A spirit of interaction
To guide,
To teach,
To touch,
To continue
To shape generations
of people and land.

Words found in *Whidbey Island: Reflections on People & the Land* by Elizabeth Guss, Janice O'Mahony, and Mary Richardson, pp. 86 and 92.

Island Counterparts

While settler's
children learn lessons
in cabin,
Salish kids
wait eager to apprentice
outside at recess.

Master Lyle
teaches three Rs first.
Then children
Collective,
Speaking Chinook or English,
Teach one another.

Teach language,
how to spear salmon,
quail hunting
techniques. Then
play each other's childhood games.
School of Smith Prairie

Langley's Bunny Boom Gone Bust

Legend has it that
a horde of European hares
once escaped from
Island County Fairground.

Escaped or were released?
Barnyard scramble!
Pets for kids to
catch and keep.

Until bunnies,
uncaptured,
did what
bunnies do.

Now Langley's wild,
domestic rabbits
draw tourists and
call for debate:

Infestation that calls for
raptor importation?
Or community mascots
To feed? Let breed?

Never mind. Disease
deadly to rabbits alone
has settled the matter—
for now.

Tsunami Alternative

Base instinct led, Coho and Chum salmon,
At Maxwelton Watershed,
Seek habitat up creek bed.

Revised for farm and suburban interest,
Home they trust betrays with harm.
Salmon, spawn, fry—raise alarm!

All's lost, some say, and call for tsunami—
Mommy Nature's harsh sashay
To reset salmon pathway.

Stewards, meanwhile, of Whidbey's watershed,
Embed in kids a lifestyle,
Preserving all on this isle.

Patient, creation waits for Christ to come—
Bring freedom from destruction,
Creation's reconstruction.

Delisted Plant Species

Golden paintbrush,
once endangered,
spreads its canary-colored
bristles every year

on Ebey's Bluff
overlooking Puget Sound,

in Ebey's Field,
growing among prairie grasses,

and elsewhere here and there,
flourishing anew
on America's first
and only
national historic reserve.

Jimmy Carter surely approves:
Ebey's Landing works.

Conclusion

Two Rocks on Which I Stand

All ground but Christ is sinking sand. Metaphor of truth Edward Mote wrote. My truth as well, not literal. One home after another sunk, now mere memories. Moves by ministry call, military command. I'd do no different, see God's hand. Yet that is past, I pray.

Peripatetic
no more, I stand on this Rock,
foretaste of heaven . . .

where forever
I will stand on Christ
Who has planted my feet,
for now,
on this island home.

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