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At the Edge of Things

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Since I'm willing to speak to anyone who wants to speak with me, and rarely try to avoid anyone, I think of myself as accessible. If anything, I've suffered from getting too emotionally involved in the lives and problems of others, of lacking what we call, mistakenly I think, objectivity. So I'm taken aback from time to time when I hear myself described as standoffish.

Then, on reflection I have to admit that I grew up standing off, sort of at the edge of things. From the time I can remember I was living with my grandparents, silent people who communicated little, and who left me to my own devices for hours. For long periods I seemed barely a part of their lives. They gave no work to do though they worked very hard themselves. I think it was harder for them to explain what they wanted done and how to do it than to do it themselves.

So I was at the edge of their existence. And our house was at the edge too, for my entire boyhood the only house on our side of the block, thick rich woods all around it—willows, cedars, dogwoods, alders, hazel nut trees (filberts), red hawthorne, ferns, moss, grass, salal. Our side of the block was special, our house standing alone and the woods mine alone to play in.

The woods to the north held three rain ponds. To a small boy two seemed sizable though I suspect now that they were ten feet across, if that. The third was very small but I liked it best. The pond of water collected at the bottom of a stump of what had been an enormous tree, perhaps three feet in diameter at the base. The stump had been hollowed out and the inside burned. The inner walls were charred black, and coating that black, growing from it, flared a bright green moss. The rain pooled at the bottom of the stump reflected that rich green and black. The surface glowed like obsidian and emeralds.

When I leaned over the edge of the stump and looked straight down I saw my face and behind it the sky, the white clouds moving north. Once I went there to play and found a garter snake swimming in the pond. I waited for it to leave before I sailed my bark submarines, my fern cruisers. I recall a honeysuckle growing wild is somewhat rare in the Pacific Northwest, and I assumed that something unique about my rain pond warranted honeysuckle growing there.
My late Aunt Sara told me that when I was three or four, my grandparents couldn't find me one day and they called and called. They finally found me at the rain pond "fishing." I had cracked a long twig in the middle; the half of it hanging down, my "line," was in the water, the other half, my "pole," gripped hard in my fist. Since the pond was close to the house I could have heard them calling and can only assume that "fishing" had my attention's priority. I don't remember that, but I remember I used to drink the rain water because I believed it was "poisoned" or "diseased" and that by drinking it and not getting sick, not dying, I could successfully defy whatever in the world might threaten to destroy me. I drank water from ponds, swamps and ditches to prove my immortality but I told no one. My immortality was my secret, shared only with water. At least, that's how I like to remember it.

Grandmother was a bit cracked, quite primitive at times such as mornings when she held prolonged conversations with herself. I'd wake up and hear her in the kitchen: who on earth can she be talking to? I'd go out and find only her, babbling away.

On the other hand, Grandfather often whistled barely audible tunes to himself but seldom spoke. He seemed to carry inside himself his own portable radio which he turned on when he pleased to avoid boredom.

Given our lean cultural holdings we grabbed at almost anything that offered escape or amusement. Each day we read the comics thoroughly. Once someone in Moon Mullins announced a stranger was coming to visit. Grandmother became excited and said that she was sure the stranger would turn out to be Daddy Warbucks. "That can't be," I whined in frustration. "Daddy Warbucks is in Little Orphan Annie. He can't be in Moon Mullins, too." But Grandmother held firm. She was convinced Daddy Warbucks was on his way. She always liked Daddy Warbucks because he showed up just when Little Orphan Annie needed him. She may well have spent much of her life wishing for a Daddy Warbucks. Her own father had hung himself in a Michigan barn when she was eight. Then her oldest brother, Fred, had taken over as head of the family. I gather he had been mean to her.

I never could determine if I wrote poems to make sure things remained where they belonged, or to free things to wander in where they were not expected but would be welcome all the same.

Our house was on the edge of Seattle, less than two blocks inside
the city limits, in a district that was then a town, isolated from the
parent city by miles of woods and undeveloped land, and whose
reputation for violence and wild behaviour seemed to put it at the
edge of civilization. A glance at a map shows Seattle itself is
practically on the edge of the nation.

Seattle was a strange city, more Scandinavian than anything else in
character. Downtown, it often seemed inhabited by silent people,
everywhere but in the Pike Place Market where the Italians, Greeks
and Orientals hawked their produce with loud voices and colorful
spies and gestures. One story goes that President Calvin Coolidge
paraded down 4th Avenue and thousands of people lining the streets
to watch him made no sound. In the '30's Seattle was reputed to have
a suicide rate second only to Berlin. One explanation went that
suicides were people running away from themselves and their lives,
and that after one reached Seattle there was no place left to run to.
They had reached the edge. The Aurora Bridge was barely completed,
it seemed, before people started throwing themselves from it.
Certainly the repressive liquor laws and Blue Laws were
characteristic of the cheerlessness of that city, though that has all
changed now. Once fun seemed as out of style as a week of cloudless
days. Seattle was gray, cool, windy, cloudy, moody, and oppressively
quiet.

Bad things were happening in that house at the edge of the city. My
grandmother's selfish possessive love of me, and her resentment of
men in general and of what she perceived as their sexual freedom and
irresponsibility, as well as her sudden bursts of gratuitous cruelty,
were producing a spoiled, confused, extremely neurotic young man.
My grandfather's silences seemed like a lack of support and that
didn't help matters. "There's no worse pain in the world than
childbirth," Grandmother told me when I was too small to
understand. "Does it hurt the man, too?" I asked in serious
innocence. "No," she said bitterly, "all a man gets out of it is the
pleasure." And I thought of sex as something bad a man did to a
woman. If I was ever to love a woman I must never do anything that
awful to her.

One day Grandmother announced that we, she and I, were going
on a picnic. I was still quite small and though unable to articulate
what I felt, I knew that she was doing this for me. It was one of her few
attempts to relieve the boredom of a child living with relatively old
people. Grandfather had the car at work so we set out on foot with
our picnic basket. Time of year? It must have been July or August
because the bracken was brown and crisp, and I seem to remember
dust.
We walked perhaps half a mile or a bit more to the intersection of McKinnon Road and Trenton Street. Suddenly Grandmother said, "Down here. We'll have our picnic here." "Down here" turned out to be a vacant lot that plunged below road level on the southwest corner of Trenton and McKinnon, two fairly busy streets. The lot was ugly with dry fallen small trees, summer-dried ferns and no grass, a terrible place to picnic with traffic going by just above us. I realized that Grandmother just didn't want to walk farther. We ate in silence and I couldn't help but be impressed with the pathetic attempt it was to show me a good time.

That picnic, the failure it was, never left me, and every so often in my poems there's an allusion to a failed picnic or a picnic held in the wrong place.

Four years ago, maybe five, my wife and I were staying at a friend's summer house on Marrowstone Island in Puget Sound. One afternoon, watching TV news from Seattle, we saw a segment about some young people called on to help weed out the thick brush that had overgrown Longfellow Creek. In an interview one young man of high school age stated that he had lived a block and a half away all his life and had never known a creek ran there. He and the reporter were at Holden Street where it crosses the creek.

It seemed impossible that a creek that had been so important to me, where I had gone again and again to fish during my boyhood years, now flowed unnoticed and unknown. And where Holden Street crossed the creek and the boy and reporter talked, more than 45 years before I had stood on a relatively crude wooden bridge, six years old, and seen Longfellow Creek for the first time. Cousin Warren, ten, had brought me, I'm sure, since the distance from my house, well over a mile, was too far for me to have come on my own at that age. Several boys were there, Warren's chums, all four years or so older than I. Seven or eight feet down ran the creek, a steady, smooth flow of clear water, less than a foot deep, about four feet across. It flowed out of thick watercress and on the other side of the bridge vanished into more cress, tunneling its way north to the sea, though many stretches I was to find later ran open and were easy to fish, as was the stretch right below us on the bridge.
One boy lowered a fish line into the water, an earthworm on the hook. The boy controlled the line by hand, having no pole. For a short time the worm hung quietly in the water. I remember it hung there steady so the boy must have had a sinker on the line, too. Suddenly a trout appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, black along the back, perhaps six inches long, sleek, hovering, barely swinging its tail to hold firm in the pour. It stared at the worm. The moment it appeared, the boys yelled. I'd seen my first trout. The surprise of its sudden appearance, the excited cries of the boys, the beauty and gracefulness of the fish, the suspense as we waited to see if it would take the bait, I would never forget.

Many years later, arranging my first book of poems, I put the poem based on that experience at the beginning because, though it is not the earliest poem in the book, it seems to me to have grown out of the earliest experience that could rightfully be called an impulse to write.

TROUT

Quick and yet he moves like silt.
I envy dreams that see his curving silver in the weeds. When stiff as snags he blends with certain stones.
When evening pulls the ceiling tight across his back he leaps for bugs.

I wedged hard water to validate his skin—
call it chrome, say red is on his side like apples in a fog, gold gills. Swirls always looked one way until he carved the water into many kinds of current with his nerve-edged nose.

And I have stared at steelhead teeth to know him, savage in his sea-run growth, to drug his facts, catalog his fins with wings and arms, to bleach the black back of the first I saw and frame the cries that sent him snaking to oblivions of cress.

—A Run of Jacks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 3.
By the time I was old enough to go to dances I was too timid to
dance. I would slip to the edge of the dance floor, near the band where
I could listen to the music, and watch the others dance. Sometimes I
would see a boy whisper something into a girl’s ear and the girl smile,
her teeth dazzling in the spot lighting of the hall, and I wondered if I
would ever learn those secret words and make a girl smile. I felt most
at home at the edge of things and alone.

Say on the edge, on the bank of the Duwamish River. The last
stanza of an early poem, “Duwamish,” goes

But cold is a word. There is no word along
this river I can understand or say,
Not Greek threats to a fishless moon
nor Slavic chants. All words are Indian.
Love is Indian for water, and madness
means, to Redmen, I am going home.


On the edge of the ocean; the edge of the nation.

LA PUSH

Fish swim onto sand in error.
Birds need only the usual wind
to be fanatic, no bright orange
or strange names. Waves fall
from what had been flat water,
and a child sells herring
crudely at your door.

The store has a candy turnover
amazing to the proprietor.
He expected when he came
a Nordic rawness, serrated shore,
a broken moon, artifacts
and silence, large sales of corn.

Smelt are trapped in the river
by a summer habit, limit
of old netting rights ignored.
Who but an officed lawyer
far away has read the treaty,
his sense of rightness rounded
in a bar? The broker’s pier
is measuring the day in kings and jacks.
Your land ends at this border, 
water and stone, mobile in tide, 
diffuse in storm, but here. 
The final fist of island rock 
does not strike space away. Swim 
and you are not in your country.

—A Run of Jacks, p. 9.

The fear is always there. If you return home you risk madness. If you leave your country, your home, you face the unknown. Poems could start on the edge of things, on the border between home and the void. But who would write them?

Well, whoever wrote them would have to be tougher and wiser than I am. Someone who could return home and stay there long enough to find the poem and not go mad, and who wasn't afraid of his feelings when they came.

THE WAY A GHOST DISSOLVES

Where she lived the close remained the best. 
The nearest music and the static cloud, 
sun and dirt were all she understood. 
She planted corn and left the rest 
to elements, convinced that God 
with giant faucets regulates the rain 
and saves the crops from frost or foreign wind.

Fate assisted her with special cures. 
Rub a half potato on your wart 
and wrap it in a damp cloth. Close 
your eyes and whirl three times and throw. 
Then bury rag and spud exactly where 
they fall. The only warts that I have now 
are memories or comic on my nose.

Up at dawn. The earth provided food 
if worked and watered, planted green 
with rye grass every fall. Or driven wild 
by snakes that kept the carrots clean, 
she butchered snakes and carrots with a hoe. 
Her screams were sea birds in the wind, 
her chopping—nothing like it now.
I will garden on the double run,
my rhythm obvious in ringing rakes,
and trust in fate to keep me poor and kind
and work until my heart is short,
then go out slowly with a feeble grin,
my fingers flexing but my eyes gone gray
from cramps and the lack of oxygen.

Forget the tone. Call the neighbor’s trumpet
golden as it grates. Exalt the weeds.
Say the local animals have class
or help me say that ghost has gone to seed.
And why attempt to see the cloud again—
the screaming face it was before it cracked
in wind from Asia and a wanton rain.

—A Run of Jacks, pp. 71-72.

And someone who wasn’t afraid to go the other way and risk the void.

NORTHWEST RETROSPECTIVE: MARK TOBHEY

What life is better—stone and stone?
Freaks are honored in the east with shrines,
even marked and worshiped, even painted
if some color amplifies the strange.
In the market men are selling color
cheap as fruit. On canvas what faint
line extending, splits and lives,
returns and multiplies, and never ending
stiffens like a fighter’s wrist, becomes
a net and traps our eyes with salmon,
or is silk and floating, or is quiet
like a map? What drums are driving
migratory ants through charming lakes,
and if beholders weep, what painter
needs their tears to mix tomorrow’s oils?

That’s where harmony was contraband,
and later where the loot was owned,
and later where the cirrus circled
Mars and left white trails of pain
that hung for centuries. (A line
of poetry is not a painter’s line,
and in museums flight is not allowed.)

Beyond Van Allen rings, the stars
don’t glitter, arrogant as moons.
When did we start? Light-years ago.
Why did we come? No matter. We
are not returning to that world
of ditch and strain, the research terms:
cryogenic fuels, free radicals,
plasma jets, coordinated fusion.
Only the last, in all this void, applies.
A universe is fusing in our eyes.

Why return to air and land, when
free from weight and the weight
of hope, we float toward that blue
that kisses man forever out of form.
Forget the earth, those images and lies.
They said there'd be no wind out here,
but something blows from star to star
to clean our eyes and touch our hair.

— A Run of Jacks, p. 61-62.

A space traveler would write the poem. An Indian. But above all, a
tough man, one who opted for reality over sentimentality. Years later
my first wife and a friend and I would go house haunting, one of our
favorite pastimes. There's nothing to it: just find an empty house and
haunt it. This day, a Sunday, the house we haunted was right in the
city, near the downtown area, on Boren Avenue, a major arterial until
the freeway was built years later.

It had been a big house, probably an expensive one for its time.
Then it had fallen to bad fortunes, and had become a boarding house,
with small rooms partitioned off, one of those places where poor
people end up alone in the bowels of our cities. Much debris had been
left for us to rummage through, old letters, sentimental small items
like dolls and pennants from some happier time. Also left was a heavy
framed etching that hung on the wall of what had been the living
room when the building had been a home, what was probably called
the sitting room after it became a boarding house. The etching, done
by a man named J. O. Anderson in New York in 1891, was a lovely
landscape with a canal, a sea beyond the canal, a sturdy stone country
home surrounded by trees and a charming road leading from the
viewer to the house. Two sailboats floated on the canal. I wanted very
much to live there. But was it real or an idealized dream of a place
Anderson wanted to find? Certainly where it hung was real enough,
the drab old frame building where the lonely and dispossessed ended
their lives. How many had been carried out to be buried by the
county, no mourners at the graveide, or a mourner who was not a
relative but only another near-derelict waiting his or her turn for the
same anonymous end?
Room on room, we poke debris for fun, chips of dolls, the union picnic flag, a valentine with a plump girl in a swing who never could grow body hair or old in all that lace (her flesh the color of a salmon egg), a black-edged scroll regretting death: "whereas—Great Architect—has seen it fit—the lesser aerie here—great aerie in the sky—deep sympathy." Someone could have hated this so much... he owns a million acres in Peru.

What does the picture mean, hung where it is in the best room? Peace, perhaps. The calm road leading to the house half hid by poplars, willows and the corny vines bad sketchers used around that time, the white canal in front with two innocuous boats en route, the sea suggested just beyond the bar, the world of harm behind the dormant hill.

Why could room 5 cook and 7 not? These dirty rooms were dirty even then, the toilets ancient when installed, and light was always weak and flat like now, or stark from a bare bulb. And the boarders when they spoke of this used "place" and "house," the one with photos of Alaska on his wall said "edifice." This home could be a joke on the horizon—bad proportions and the color of disease.

But the picture, where? The Netherlands perhaps. There are Netherland canals. But are they bleached by sky, or scorched pale gray by an invader's guns? It can't exist. It's just a sketcher's whim. The world has poison and the world has sperm and water looks like water, not like milk or a cotton highway. There's a chance a man who sweated years in a stale room, probably one upstairs, left the picture here on purpose, and when he moved believed that was the place he was really moving from.

—A Run of Jacks, pp. 51-52.
I call the etching a sketch because at the time I didn’t know the
difference. Had I known I would have done it anyway—etching is an
awkward word to use in a poem. And I lie about the etching, too. It
isn’t that bad or that corny, but I’m loading the dice. Besides, I didn’t
have it to study when I worked on the poem. After the poem was
finished my wife stole the picture from the abandoned house, not long
before the city pulled the building down and the etching would have
ended on the junk heap.

Years later I would understand the poem as a struggle between the
sentimental and the real. My grandparents didn’t have much going
for them, a fierce peasant honesty, religion, superstition and
sentimentality, the last three mostly Grandmother’s influences. And
by the time I was twenty-one I was a veteran of a war, a man who
sensed the world was far too hard a place for someone who had
inherited the sentimental values of people born in the nineteenth
century with little opportunity for formal education. Sentimentality
had helped them through a harsh life that knew little other than the
soil, hard work and meager returns. But it would not help me through
the modern world. My attitudes were dated and I would have to
change to survive.

So the ideal place in the picture represents the sentimental, that
which I must discard. The boarding house represents the real, that
which I must embrace. If I don’t, then I will end like the man at the
end of the poem, quite mad, unable to distinguish reality from dream,
believing I live in the ideal lovely stone house far out in the country,
far from any possibility of harm—what could happen to you in that
dear place? They wouldn’t let cancer within a hundred miles of it—
and ignoring that place where I really lived, that boarding house
where damaged lives played out their final years. No, I must accept
reality in all its grimness. What a tough guy speaks in the poem. You
wouldn’t fool with anyone who says, “The world has water and the
world has sperm.” He’s right there, engaged with the real all the way.

Clever interpretation, isn’t it? A good one, too. But wait. One day I
gave that interpretation in class, the poem run off and handed out, the
picture propped up for the class to see. A student with a beautiful
name, Tatiana Retivov, suddenly asked me, “When you finally
moved from your grandparents’ house, which house did you think
you were moving from?” Who first said that education is the teacher
learning from the students? Right on, whoever you are. The lights
turned on.
HOUSES

The house you're moving from is not this house in the sketch, nor that one over there, your furniture on the porch and your nameplate weathered fast to the door. The picture's too idyllic, shade trees rooted strategic and firm, roses crawling ivy crawling the walls, leaded windows that double the sadness of rain. And the real one's too run down. The van moves off with everything, even the girl you could not find the courage to ask home.

Some say, 'where I hang my hat.' Some say, 'where the heart is beating though hurt.' Whatever you say, make sure it's alone in a cold garage, the mechanic's hammer banging you mute. Make sure only you hear the address. Make sure your car when fixed will not break down between the home in the sketch and the home you deny, the boy with your mouth who shouts goodbye from the roof.

Sail easy on the freeway. Your next home has never been photoed. Your next home town's where so little goes on, the hum of your refrigerator joins the slow river leaving for home. Isn't it familiar? Rain hitting the south window first? Dark corner where the warm light can cringe? If you go with rivers, not roads, the trip takes longer and you weave and see a lot more. When you say, 'I live here,' animals you hadn't thought of for years live on your lawn. They insist you remember their names.


With all due credit to the intelligence of Miss Retivov, earlier I had tried to catch my final time in my grandparents' house. They were long dead, Grandmother first and three years and two months later, Grandfather. The house went to my mother and her two sisters and they sold it. I'd moved out long before. Still, I had lived there about twenty-five years and I always felt it was there, and that if I could not find the social stability necessary to make it through life, for I was so maladjusted at times it seemed I might not be able to hold a job, I could always return to that house and live there alone. But now it would not be there for me. Almost all the furniture had been removed though the two wooden chairs remained in the kitchen and I sat in
one under the bare light bulb shining overhead. Why didn't we ever have lamps like other people? The drab empty rooms, the shadows, the memories, the sudden realization that this night when I walked out I could never return again, became overwhelming. I broke out of control into violent sobbing. I couldn’t stop for a long time. Years later, pre-Retivov but after “1614 Boren,” I would find a poem in that final evening there, but the emotion had long gone and I would create another.

LAST DAY THERE

All furniture’s gone. It hits me in this light
I've always hated thinned the way it is
by tiny panes, when I leave now the door will slam
no matter how I close it and my groin will throb
hungry as these rooms. Someone left the snapshot
on the wall, two horses and a man, a barn
dark gray against gray light I think was sky
but could be eighty years of fading. Once I called
that unknown farmer friend. He stared back
ignorant and cold until I blushed.
What denies me love today helps me hold a job.

This narrow space I slept in twenty years,
a porch walled in, a room just barely added on.
I own this and I know it is not mine.
That day I found locked doors in Naples, streets
rocked in the sea. The sea rocked in the hands
of brutal sky and fish came raining from volcanoes.
I see the horses swirl into the barn. I hear
two shots, no groans. When I say I'm derelict
the horses will return to flank the farmer.
Again, the three die gray as April 7, 1892.

I'll leave believing we keep all we lose and love.
Dirt roads are hard to find. I need to walk one
shabby some glamorous way the movies like.
I'll rest at creeks. I can't help looking deep
for trout in opaque pools. I pass a farm:
it's home, eviction papers posted to the door,
inside a fat ghost packing wine to celebrate
his fear of quarantine, once outside, pleased the road
he has to take goes north without an exit ramp,
not one sign giving mileage to the end.

—What Thou Lovest Well Remains American (New
I might note that in both “Houses” and this poem I’m much more receptive to that sentimental side of self that I rejected so disdainfully in “1614 Boren.” But I’m older and have come to accept much of what I am, and I don’t worry what others think about it.

But that wasn’t my last day there, it turned out. I would return one more time, some twenty-five years later, this time with some filmmakers doing a movie about my work and my life. We went to the house to shoot some outside footage. My late Aunt Sara and I did a scene on the front steps. Also, I walked around the house and into the backyard in another bit of the movie.

But a surprise waited. A man lived there alone. He apologized for not having cut the lawn. He obviously drank quite a bit, and was self-deprecating, constantly apologizing for something or other he hadn’t done though it was clear he might never do it—such as cut the lawn or sweep the house. I’d always entertained the idea that had I bought the house from my mother and aunts and remained there alone my writing would have been different. I fancied that I would have written less but better. My poems would have been wilder, perhaps longer. I’d carried this inside me for twenty-five years, playing the scene of what I would have been over and over. And now I saw in the last tenant with terrible clarity the man I would have become. It gave me the creeps.

I asked if we could come in and, eager to please us, the sad man said of course. I found the interior much changed. New walls up, old walls down. A few things remained. I went through the basement, too. A lot of memories came back, of course, but not much definite feeling. I was mostly moved by the diffident man who lived there now alone and who supported himself with a menial job at a shop where they made doors for houses.

DOING THE HOUSE

For Philip Levine

This will be the last time. Clearly they will tear it down, one slate shingle at a time and the man here now, last occupant, face the color of old snow will leave for the cold he is certain of, sweating more than last night’s bad wine.
He is the man I would have become.  
When he leaves he wires the door  
and padlocks the wire.  When he comes home  
he knows his is the one unkept yard  
on the block.  The weeds, he believes,  
are the weeds that will cover his grave.  
The style's so old the house does not belong,  
not even alone, the way it stood '14  
to '44, brush on three sides  
not much better, scrub hawthorne  
and salal and the dogwood threatening  
to die, huge now in some neighbor's  
backyard and blooming a white  
I don't remember like the walls  
yellow as sick eyes inside where I move  
room to room, one wall gone, another  
for no good reason put up blocking  
the kitchen from the room where we ate.  
We called it the eating room  
and my claim on this has run out.  

It's nice of the last man here  
to let me come in.  I want to tell him  
he's me, menial job at the door plant,  
table set just barely for one.  I want  
to tell him I've been writing poems  
the long time I've been away and need  
to compare them with poems  
I left here, never to be written, never  
to be found in the attic where hornets  
starve and there's no flooring.  
Are they wild?  Do they ring sad and real  
as the years here would have become,  
as real and unseen as women  
would have been dreamed, curled  
in the corner where light still  
has a hard time?  And later, Lord,  
later I would have prayed  
and begged to be forgiven for the blood.  

This will be the last time.  The road  
outside's been paved twenty years,  
the road no one ever came down  
long as I waited, except for a bum  
who whistled, "I'll Paint the Clouds  
with Your Sunshine."  Now the bus  
downtown's routed by, every ten minutes  
fresh diesel fumes.  Across the street
only three of the old homes remain,  
one where a sad man lived,  
a man who drank himself to the grave  
and drank his way into my poems  
at least twice. He was the first sad man  
I remember. I preferred sadness  
to anger and I preferred him  
for too long a time. My last gesture  
will be at the door, facing east.  
It will be a look at the hill  
two blocks away, that delayed dawn  
every morning and stood between me  
and a nation. I live east of that hill.  
Thanks to the man with a face the color  
of wet salt, the second true sad man  
on this block, it is not madness  
for the first time I have gone home.

—White Center, pp. 4-6.

I remember that I told Annick Smith, the movie director, of my 25-year-old fantasy about living alone all that time in the house and what I felt my poems would have become given those circumstances. “Don’t be foolish,” she said. “If you’d stayed there you would have stopped writing years ago.”
I seldom talk about reading as an influence for a couple of reasons. One is that I remember what I see and hear far more vividly than I remember what I read. The other is that in a sense we’ve all been influenced by the same poets, either by the masters directly, or indirectly by poets already influenced by the masters. But a few influences from reading I don’t share with others.

I remember four books in our house. The Bible which my grandmother read, moving her lips to form the words so she could comprehend them—she’d only had four years of schooling and could not read without moving her lips. She could write but used no capitals, no punctuation, and she spelled with a rudimentary crudeness that my mother and I used to laugh about, though not with cruelty, I hope.

The other books were Heidi, Zane Grey’s Rainbow Trail, and a children’s book called Peter Rabbit and the Big Brown Bear. Grandmother often announced that Heidi was her favorite novel. She read it over and over. I would never read it.

But I read the Zane Grey several times, and it seems I must have read the Peter Rabbit book hundreds of times. Every so often, a chapter of the Peter Rabbit book started out with a poem, a rhymed quatrain, as I recall, ABCB. I delighted in those poems and would read each aloud as I came to it, taking special pleasure in the rhyme.

Somewhere in that book, which I’ve not seen in decades, toward the end of a chapter, Peter Rabbit is caught in a blizzard. His situation is desperate, snow piling fast and harsh winds blowing. He must find shelter. Then he spots far across a field, a light shining, and he makes his way across the wide meadow through the swirl of snow and the driving gale, finally arriving nearly spent at the entrance of the dwelling, which is really a cave house complete with door and windows. Peter, with a final effort, throws open the door and collapses inside on the warm floor, safe at last from the elements.

The next chapter started with a poem. The owner of the cave house, who turns out to be the big brown bear, is speaking. It went something like this:

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Note—Beatrix Potter, the British author who created Peter Rabbit, may not be responsible for the offensive quatrain. Her books were not protected adequately in the United States, and were heavily pirated and plagiarized. The editors of CutBank have been unable to discover “Peter Rabbit and the Big Brown Bear” among her titles, but with the limited time available for research this lack of discovery should not be taken as proof of any kind.
What are you doing inside of my house?  
You knocked all the snow off your feet with your jump.  
Why don't you knock before you come in?  
I've a notion to cut off your head with a saw.

The first time I read it I felt let down. "Jump" does not rhyme with "saw," as anyone can plainly hear. After all, the poems had always rhymed before. What right did the author have to throw up his or her hands this way? During one of my mother's visits I called this to her attention and for several years we would recall that quatrain and laugh about it. Though it became funny, during the first few re-readings of the book I still felt betrayed by the author and his or her failure to rhyme. After all he or she could have tried:

I've a notion to cave in your skull with a thump.  
I've a notion to beat out your brains on a stump.  
I've a notion to kick your rabbity rump.

Whoever wrote that book is probably dead. But to his or her spirit I say, Come on, one more try. At the time it seemed extremely important that the poet had failed his or her obligation to that poem.

A huge fleshy woman, Miss Effie Aiken, my eighth grade teacher, ran a tight ship, taking no crap from the impulsive 12- and 13-year-olds who filled her class. I was already writing, if that's what I was doing. Well, I was putting words on paper. That's writing, isn't it? One day, Miss Aiken read a poem aloud to the class, a poem by Tennyson, called "The Brook." It was an experience that would last as long as that trout who swam out from under the Holden Street bridge in Longfellow Creek. I was truly moved, but how could I tell my fellow students how beautiful I thought that poem was? I was smart enough not to try. Poetry in those days was for girls, and I kept my feelings to myself. Hadn't Tennyson caught the running-water rhythm of a creek with his refrain:

For men may come and men may go  
but I go on forever.

And wasn't that true? To a 12-year-old boy it seemed so. Didn't the creeks run forever, while we lived and died? Oh, that wisdom.
That experience, hearing “The Brook” read aloud, stuck a long time. In 1968, staying in London, I took a trip to Lincolnshire and saw Tennyson’s house, and also the creek (brook) that had “inspired” the poem, as we used to say.

The creek was lovely and the land it flowed through seemed to have not changed since Tennyson’s time. I saw no recent houses, no roads that seemed new. It struck me how easy it must have been for Tennyson to imagine he owned the creek, possessed it utterly and forever. And though I knew it couldn’t possibly be true, in some fanciful, alas probably egotistical way, I imagined for just a moment that I was the first person since Tennyson to see that creek. It was an easy delusion to come by because except for my companion I remember seeing no other people, only two cemeteries in the yards of two churches not very far apart. What a lovely world for a poet to have lived in as a child. And it remains just as it was, remote, private, to my eye ignored by the rest of the world.

Recently I found a copy of “The Brook” in a collected Tennyson. Alas, it isn’t very good. It is much longer than I remember and I’m sure Miss Aiken, bless her, read only the verse refrains.

In the late forties I found a book of poems by the English poet Bernard Spencer, called Aegean Islands and Other Poems. First published in Great Britain in 1946, it was published by Doubleday in the United States in 1948. It is far from the best, I know, but that isn’t important. It has meant more to me than many books that were better.

Spencer did it exactly the way I wanted to. He left home (though he went farther than I wanted to), and he lived near water and there he found his poems. In his case he lived in self-exile in both the Greek Islands and in Egypt, with a group of writers and scholars, George Seferis the one destined to become most famous. Spencer had a charm that can only come from a winning naivete’. What poem fell as innocently on the page as the first poem in his book?

AEGEAN ISLANDS 1940-41

Where white stares, smokes or breaks,
Thread white, white of plaster and of foam,
Where sea like a wall falls;
Ribbed, lionish coast,
The stony islands which blow into my mind
More often than I imagine my grassy home;
To sun one’s bones beside the
Explosive, crushed-blue, nostril-opening sea
(The weaving sea, splintered with sails and foam,
Familiar of famous and deserted harbours,
Of coins with dolphins on and fallen pillars.)

To know the gear and skill of sailing,
The drenching race for home and the sail-white houses,
Stories of Turks and smoky ikons,
Cry of the bagpipe, treading
Of the peasant dancers;

The dark bread
The island wine and the sweet dishes;
All these were elements in a happiness
More distant now than any date like ’40,
A.D. or B.C., ever can express.

—Aegean Islands and Other Poems, p. 3.

He took firm, tender and private emotional possession of a region
where he was a foreigner, an intruder perhaps, certainly a stranger
and he felt it. And he lived his invented relation with the landscape
out to some kind of poetic realization. I would like to have said “to
poetic perfection” but that would be wrong. He didn’t come close to
executing most poems perfectly. But some kind of perfection lay in
his acceptance of what he was, a bewildered innocent in the face of
thousands of years of civilization and history and wisdom, what
many of us have been at least once in our time. Spencer was not afraid
to blurt out the simplest, most disarming truth:

I was looking for things which have a date,
And less of the earth’s weight,
When I broke this crust.

—from “Greek Excavations,” p. 14

In the boulevards of these dead you will think of violence,
Holiness and violence, violence of sea that is bluer
Than blue eyes are; violence of sun and its worship;
Of money and its worship. And it was here by the breakers
That strangers asked for the truth.

—from “Delos,” p. 16

and it may be, too, we are born with some nostalgia
to make the migration of sails
and wings a crying matter

—from “Yachts On the Nile,” pp. 29-30
He was not afraid of his innocence, his poetic roughness. Literature, the important stuff—Eliot, Pound, Williams—was being offered in the classrooms at the University of Washington. They belonged to everyone, but Spencer seemed to belong to me. He had no real literary ambition, I felt, though I may be wrong. His poems seem to settle for a simple, direct validation of his relations with the world, often made crudely but honestly:

**EGYPTIAN DANCER AT SHUBRA**

At first we heard the jingling of her ornaments as she delayed beyond the trap of light, and glimpsed her lingering pretence her bare feet and the music were at difference: and then the strings grew wild and drew her in.

And she came soft as paws and danced desire at play or triumphing desire, and locked her hands stretched high, and in the dance's sway hung like a body to be flogged; then wrenched away, or was a wave from breasts down to the knees.

And as the music built to climax and she leaned naked in her dancing skirt, and was supreme, her dance's stormy argument had timid workday things for all environment; men's awkward clothes and chairs her skin exclaimed against.

— *Aegean Islands and Other Poems*, p. 34.

I felt my chances at ever writing anything so grand as literature were slim and I decided I would be happy to settle for a poetic world as limited and innocent as that of Bernard Spencer. Once in awhile I might get lucky there and come off graceful.

**OLIVE TREES**

The dour thing in olive trees is that their trunks are stooped like never dying crones, and they camp where roads climb, and drink with dust and stones.

The pleasant thing is how in the heat their plumage brushes the sight with a bird's-wing feeling: and perhaps the gold of their oil is mild with dreams of healing.

The cold thing is how they were there at the start of us; and one grey look surveyed the builder imagining the city, the historian with his spade.
The warm thing is that they are first promise of the South to waking travellers: of the peacock sea, and the islands and their boulder-lumbered spurs.

—Aegean Islands and Other Poems, p. 31.

Spencer was at the edge of things himself. To this day his reputation as a poet remains relatively obscure. He is seldom mentioned with the other, better-known poets of his time. He lived at the edge of islands, even, one could say, at the edge of civilization, a stranger whose only license to be there seemed to be his childlike love of place.

And he based many of his poems on places. It was Spencer's poems based on place, and a poem called "Copalis Beach" written by my friend Kenneth Hanson, that first gave me the idea of writing place poems, something I still do. Places were special to me, very special it turned out. In psychoanalysis, where I tried and more or less succeeded in overcoming the problems I'd acquired in early life, I learned that I identified as strongly with places as I did with people. Could that be why one night long ago I wept just as violently for the loss of a house as I had for the loss of the two old people who had lived there, and whom I'd lived with for about 25 years? And did it follow that in my visual imagination I could not separate event from setting? That I thought where something happened was just as important as what had happened? Sometimes it seemed the place was more important than the event since the event happened and was done while the place remained. It often seemed that way when I wrote. If I could find the place I could find the poem.

Sometimes I'd see the place and invent the happening.

MONTANA RANCH ABANDONED

Cracks in eight log buildings, counting sheds and outhouse, widen and a ghost peeks out. Nothing, tree or mountain, weakens wind coming for the throat, even wind must work when land gets old. The rotting wagon tongue makes fun of girls who begged to go town. Broken brakerods dangle in the dirt.
Alternatives were madness or a calloused moon. Wood they carved the plowblade from turned stone as nameless gray. Indifferent flies left dung intact. One boy had to leave when horses pounded night, and miles away a neighbor’s daughter puked. Mother’s cry to dinner changed to caw in later years.

Maybe raiding bears or eelworms made them quit, or daddy died, or when they planted wheat dead Flatheads killed the plant. That stove without a grate can’t warm the ghost. Tools would still be good if cleaned, but mortar flakes and log walls sag. Even if you shored, cars would still boom by beyond the fence, no glance from drivers as you till the lunar dust.


Sometimes I’d invent the place, then “see” it clearly enough to invent the happening.

CAPE NOTHING

The sea designed these cliffs. Stone is cut away odd places like a joke. A suicide took aim, then flew out in the arc he thought would find the sea. He came down hearing “sucker” in the wind, heard it break at “suck-“ and all the time tide was planning to ignore his bones.

Far out, the first white roll begins. What an easy journey to this shore, gliding miles of water over stars and mudshark bones that laugh through tons of green. You can time that wave and wind by tripling your memory of oars. The sea will con the gold from our remains.

Foam is white. When not, no dirtier than bones gone brown with waiting for the sea. When wind deposits spray on bone bone begins to trickle down the sand. Now the bones are gone, another shark abandoned to the sea’s refractive lie. The moon takes credit for the boneless rock.
Bones don’t really laugh beneath the sea. They yawn and frown through green at time and lie in squares to kid the moon and drive stars from the water with the gleam of phosphorus gone mad. Now a diver poses on the cliff for passing cars before he flies out singing “water, I am yours”


Sometimes I’d see the place and reinvent what had actually happened there.

BEAR PAW

The wind is 95. It still pours from the east like armies and it drains each day of hope. From any point on the surrounding rim, below, the teepees burn. The wind is infantile and cruel. It cries “give in” “give in” and Looking Glass is dying on the hill. Pale grass shudders. Cattails beg and bow. Down the draw, the dust of anxious horses hides the horses. When it clears, a car with Indiana plates is speeding to Chinook.

That bewildering autumn, the air howled garbled information and the howl of coyotes blurred the border. Then a lull in wind. V after V of Canada geese. Silence on the highline. Only the eternal nothing of space. This is Canada and we are safe. You can study the plaques, the unique names of Indians and bland ones of the whites, or study books, or recreate from any point on the rim the action. Marked stakes tell you where they fell. Learn what you can. The wind takes all you learn away to reservation graves.

If close enough to struggle, to take blood on your hands, you turn your weeping face into the senile wind. Looking Glass is dead and will not die. The hawk that circles overhead is starved for carrion. One more historian is on the way, his cloud on the horizon. Five years from now the wind will be 100, full of Joseph’s words and dusting plaques. Pray hard to weather, that lone surviving god, that in some sudden wisdom we surrender.

—The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir, pp. 76-77.
However it worked, the process was based on the visual and involved a faith in the mystique of place, a notion treated disdainfully by some poets, notably Charles Olson. I would not defend it. That would be defending my poems, a tasteless and futile thing to do. I can only remark that in my case it seemed to work. At least I got a lot of poems, some of them as good as I'm capable of writing.

But do I mean reinvent, or do I sometimes simply rediscover? In the case of "Bear Paw," the result of a visit to the Montana battlefield where the Nez Perce finally surrendered, when I first saw that site I felt nothing. It seemed a dull place with no distinguishing features when I stepped from my car and looked at it. No one else was there. Then I walked through the campsite and up the embankment on the other side. When I turned and looked back from "the rim," the edge of the scene, the last camp of the Indians, the approach of the soldiers, the teepees burning, the fear and confusion, the cries, the soldiers dying, the Indians dying, the wails, the tears, Chief Looking Glass dying practically, if the marker could be believed, at my feet, Chief Joseph’s surrender speech, the final line of that speech, "I will fight no more forever," came clear, all provided one sad time more by the empty land.