A Return to the LSF Poetry of Lawyers
8.28.2006
James R. Elkins

◆ I placed Joseph Caldwell's poems first, in the first anthology of lawyers' poetry (2004), and I did it because his poems are so perfectly evocative of this "place" — this state of West Virginia where I've resided since 1977, thirty years now.

Here is a Caldwell poem which I particularly like, (albeit not because it speaks directly to the particulars of West Virginia, as does "Buffalo Creek" (p. 21), "Out-Migration" (p. 22), "Cabin Creek, Near Ohley" (p. 23), "School Boy on Harts Creek" (p. 24), and "Paint Creek" (p. 26)):

Kanawha Trail

November's morning sun uncovers
frost covered spider webs
criss crossing the trail.
A purple sweet gum angles
over bruised mushrooms
before fading
to a surface grave.
Hemlock roots grasp
cantilevered rocks.
Shadows interlock trees
becoming undone
and I trudge along
oblivious to myself.

[p. 25]

For the narrator in Warren Woessner's "November," there is, in his walk, no so much a sense of obliviousness but a vague sense of alone-ness. Here is Warren Woessner's "November":

November

Perfect gray day
leaves dead or dull green.
Today I go where I want,
fit in,
push through the tall weeds in my old coat
not hurting a thing.
Most birds long gone—
mosquitoes frozen out.
Down the creek, one muskrat
hunts for food under a fallen box elder.
I stand on the bank
content but lonely,
no friend along, no way
to celebrate the good news.

[p. 61]

Let's go back to the Joseph Caldwell poem, "Kanawha Trail." Here we see a poet doing what we expect poets to do—and that is to observe carefully. We're all surrounded by the "natural" world; but in the day-to-day affairs of life, we loss the immediate presence of this world—until we again seek it out, or have it thrust upon us, or have it re-invoked for us.[1] Caldwell,

[1] Richard Taylor, in "Letter to David Orr" thanks Orr for showing him something like what Joseph Caldwell shows the reader. Taylor says:

> Thank you for showing me
> the cane today,
> the tall patch near Goose Creek
> a parking lot will cover soon.

in “Kanawha Trail” does the pointing for us; he provides a reminder of what it is in the world that I did not today try to see. The poet here is a seer, an observer; and it is by way of the poem that I become an observer of the world the poet helps me see.

The other thing I like about this wonderful simple poem is that the poet makes a surprise appearance. As the poet renders for us what he sees along the Kanawha Trail, as he “trudge[s] along,” he realizes that he has become “oblivious to himself.” Yet, there’s irony here: the poet become conscious enough of the feeling of obliviousness so that it too can become a state of consciousness, can be seen like the frost covered spider webs, the purple sweet gums, and the hemlock roots on the rocks.

The sudden, surprising, and delightful appearance of the poet (narrator) at the end of “Kanahwa Trail” reminds me of Robert Bly’s versions of Kabir’s ecstatic poems. I once heard Bly recite the following Kabir poem, where Kabir puts in a personal appearance at the end of the poem:

> Inside this clay jug there there are canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!
>
> All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of starts.
>
> The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels.
>
> And the music from the strings no one touches, and the source of all water.
>
> If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:
> Friend, listen: the God whom I love is inside.

Here is another Kabir poem, again a Bly translation:

[p. 34]

I laugh when I hear that the fish in the water is thirsty.

You don’t grasp the fact that what is most alive of all is inside your own house;

and so you walk from one holy city to the next with a confused look!

Kabir will tell you the truth: go wherever you like, to Calcutta or Tibet:

if you can’t find where your soul is hidden,

for you the world will never be real!

[Robert Bly, The Kabir Book 6, 9 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977)]

Sometimes the poet tells us that we can’t be told exactly what the “lesson” to be drawn from the poem might be. Consider Warren Woessner’s “Hard Winter”:

Hard Winter

Walking the lines I found a rabbit
caught in the slats of a snow fence—
wide-eyed, dead.
No marks.
Whatever it ran from
missed. Snow
gave it a decent burial.
Wind dug it up again.
I pulled the stiff body free,
still frozen in flight,
and lay it on the ground.
My gloves were covered with fur.
If there was a lesson
I left it there,
got back to my fire.

[p. 51]

Reading Caldwell’s poem, “Kanawha Trail,” I begin to see the poet’s appearance in Caldwell’s poems and elsewhere.

In fact, in Caldwell's poems, this poet-makes-an-appearance at the end of the poem is a regular feature of his poetry. Here are two more Caldwell poems, "Firewatch / Kate's Mountain" and "Contact":

Firewatch
Kate's Mountain

Ridges unfold, stepping away
into plateaus
wrinkled by ancient streams.
Tin barn roofs
shine like broken mirrors
scattered across the valley.
Then winds advance,
clouds compress
into surging waves
breaking over the crest.
Listening to steady rain,
I make plans. [p. 27]

Contact

Dawn at the high meadow farm
finds the sun supported by wild flowers
erect before the first morning breeze.
Dew perspires on split-rail posts.
Sheep walk around limestone outcroppings
to drink at the blue sulphur spring.
The meadow undulates like a wave,
sinkhole troughs surrounded by
swells of pink clover.
I am nearer when I am here. [p. 29]

Reading the small LSF collection of Caldwell poems, there are some real surprises. In one poem, "Cabin Creek, Near Ohley," we are firmly planted in a particular place, and so far as the poem would have it, we're to stay there (so far as the mind can be so rooted by a poem). We notice in this poem, however, there's no

appearance of the poet, and yet he is everywhere in the craft of the poem itself.

Cabin Creek, Near Ohley

All along the winding creek
one row of clapboard houses
hugs the hollow sides.
Tracks hold the level land,
rusted rails curving through pocked hills.
Mine drainage hemorrhages
from ruptured veins
of worked out tombs
turning rocks along the creek purple.
A cedar waxwing sits
on a broken tavern sign.
Redbuds dominate this quiet day,
fuchsia branches
dogwood,
reclaiming sovereignty. [p. 23]

In another Caldwell poem, "Night Walk" we are on some "road," but this road is not given to us in its particulars, as is "the winding creek" in "Cabin Creek, Near Ohley." The road in "Night Walk" gets us well beyond the hollows of West Virginia.

Night Walk

Reflections of one thousand moons
shine off puddles
all along the road.
All these moons
belong
to the one moon,
lighting the way.
When viewed
in their oneness
I see the world in a puddle.

[p. 32]

Compare Caldwell's moon poem, "Night Walk" with Warren Woessner's "Clearwater":

Clearwater

So still the reflection
of the full moon
on black ripples flickers
like a candle flame
in a gentle draft.
Chased off by bass boats
at twilight, the loons
return now, call the lake
their own.
The owls. The woods.

[p. 52][2]

Reading the poems, in **LSF|2004**, I eventually come up on another "road" poem, Warren Woessner's "Late Winter Rain," that is both philosophical and deeply reflective:

Late Winter Rain

On both sides of the road mist grows up
like beautiful mold
on the last scraps of snow.
The fields fill with meltwater

---

[2] And here is the opening paragraph—albeit prose—in John William Corrington's novella, "Decoration Day":

> The rain had been coming and going all afternoon, but I paid it no mind. It was early October, still warm, and the fish were moving well. I had worked most of the western shore of the lake before I decided it was time to go in, turn on the TV news, and find out what I had managed to sidestep that day. ["Decoration Day," in John William Corrington, All My Trials 1-148, at 3 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987)]

and blackbirds.
Geese occupy the lakes again.
Overhead, the weather blows
into March.
Today time travels west to east.
If I stay on this line
I can drive north forever,
dry, warm, and young. [p. 44]

And here is still another Woessner road poem, this one quite mellow:

Way To Go

At night it is a joy to drive
toward home not too far away.
The telephone poles are lost
in thought. There is room to breathe.
The farmyards sleep like dogs
under the barn lights.
Winnebago ghosts light slow fires
in cornhusk tepees.
A roadsign points the way to Eldorado
but no one turns. Two white tractor tires
mark a driveway outside Rosendale
then the blue reflectors grow and fade.
The lone radio station, demands a decision
for Jesus, but I am safe, buried
in the hearts of the saved. [p. 57]

||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||

We expect poets to be, at times, fanciful (even whimsical). The problem is aligning the poet's fanciful poem with the personal fancies of the reader. Here's a fanciful Warren Woessner poem that works for me:

Report From Iowa

Here the sky leans down and grinds the earth
like a wet sheet of sandpaper
pushed by an insane geologist
trying to erase his mistakes.
The people fight for cover:
so few trees or caves.
Turn over any leaf

and find whole families hiding there.
They secure themselves with private rituals:
festivals, dances, and hymns.
It is said that ancestor worship is still practiced.
Some men have been seen touching
and speaking to dirt
like defeated football coaches,
imagining ancient games,
trying to pick the winning side. [p. 58]

And here is Carl Reisman's "Day of the Dead":

Day of the Dead

Smooth rocks
worn by water
graves to mark the dead.
The living have left
their painted names
upon the fields of stone,
secret messages, handprints, farewells.
I move beyond the
markers, past the freight
cars packed with circus animals,
past the incense cedars
down to the intractable
ropes of kelp,
dig my hairy toes
into the shore,
skip a stone towards
Japan
and count the circles.

[Carl Reisman, Kettle 35 (Urbana, Illinois: Hot Lead Press, 2005)]

The poets do not shy away from death. Here is Frank Poemmersheim's "Autumn Sequence" [from Frank Pommersheim, Haiku for the Birds (and Other Related Stuff) 13 (Marion, South Dakota: Rose Hill Books, 2002)]:

Autumn Sequence

Death,
then black wind.

Then another
sequence:
sorrow,
mystery,
the rising sun.

We call it
life, while we can.

[Pommersheim's poem might be read as an epigraph poem to Cormac MacCarty's stunning new post-apocalyptic novel, The Road (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006)]

Here is a poem about death set with lines drawn from the language of children; the poem is by John Levy, a Tucson public defender:

Death

When you're dead, my seven-
year-old daughter explained,

one of the first things you do
is get lessons

on how to be invisible
so you can come back

as a ghost. And then
it's not

so different from being
alive.

I didn't get her words
verbatim, nor did I say

But you may find out, my
love, how being alive

you also get lessons
on what it is like to be invisible.

But we need not venture so far as the court of death, and the chilled winds that blow there, to see the play

of reflective philosophy in the work of lawyer poets. Consider Frank Pommersheim's "Dharma at Age Fifty-Five":

Dharma at Age Fifty-Five

Mystery
against dust

Wisdom
against will

Hawk
against nothing

[Haiku for the Birds, 15]

Among the lawyer poets, Richard Krech, if you're willing to stretch and extend and rewrap the notion, is I think, something of a dharma poet. Here is an early Krech poem [**LSF || 2005**][p. 283]:

Raga #1, Sanskrit Translation of The Earth

They drink Scotch for status,
the old maharajas;

have 3 or four servants,
sit around in a generally dilapidated house
watching the Jeep
drive across the horizon . . .

They hallucinate giraffes, antelopes,
the navel of buddha
riding across
the ocean
floor.

1954, what
more
could you expect them to do.

Another poem, again by Richard Krech, a more recent offering:

The 1932 3Af Claret

In July of 1932 the Afghan post office
issued its first regular series of stamps
displaying a pictorial design
instead of being confined to geometric patterns
and calligraphy. These postage stamps
depicted modern and ancient monuments
and buildings in Afghanistan.

The three Af value, printed in claret
on thick paper had an image
of the giant buddha statue
carved into the mountain at Bamiyan
some fifteen hundred years before.
The entire series was questioned
but criticism of the 3Af was particularly fierce
because the stamp portrayed a graven image
of the Bamiyan Buddha. The 3Af was withdrawn
from circulation in September of 1932.

Sixty nine years later the government
of Afghanistan destroyed the statues themselves.

The course of human progress
winds both backwards and forwards
as it journeys on its path

towards what end?

The world falling apart
at its stitches.

[LSF||2005||p.299]

And the world, when it is not "falling apart / at its stitches" is still something of a mystery. It begins like this, a Edward Hopper scene, in a poem by John Levy, a Tucson public defender:

In Hills between Villages

With a shovel, the man down there
in a black

smoking field of fallen and standing

stalks. A single blank glance

to our passing train.

Here's another John Levy poem, this one untitled:

■
the widows
in black
are at night

yelling to
each other over
the dirt road
on which they live

separately

voices of complaint
dispute
lower
for gossip

the full moon

sometimes a laugh
usually not joined

dogs from all directions
yap

one woman sighs as if shifting
some burden
they speak
with such energy breaking

the silence breaking it
into pieces as small
as stars

The Love of Poems & Poetics:

■ John Levy | LSF||2007

Bill,

I saw you on the porch today
writing, slowly bringing
the poem closer

a kite
you lost as a child . . .

A whisper
would've sent it sailing . . .

Family Get-Together

Strangers come up to me and ask
if I'm a poet, my brother Andy says. You do

look like a poet, his wife says, laughing.
Well, Andy says, turning to me, you're the poet

in the family—anyone ever think you're a poet?
I mean a stranger. Never once, I answer.

That's cuz, my sister-in-law says,
you look like a butcher. No offense.

Hey, I'm flattered, I say. Butchers

are strong, vital, and occasionally handsome.

Weird, Andy says, you look like a butcher
and you've been a vegetarian for what?

About 32 years, I say. Not eating meat
makes you look prosaic, Mom says.

No, Dad says, you are what you eat and
it's the mammals that are the poets.

Poem

We are the authors of this animal,
the creators of its setting.

The page a white sea.

Our home
with its great view of the sea.

Any time
we have

for poems

is a time
we have good luck.

A time we have
to listen to.

We are the time of this good luck,
we are it breathing.