

ZANESVILLE & WESTERN:  
A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

by

Mark Allen Jenkins

APPROVED BY SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

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Dr. Frederick Turner, Co-Chair

---

Dr. Charles Hatfield, Co-Chair

---

Dr. Matt Bondurant

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Dr. Nils Roemer

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A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

by

MARK ALLEN JENKINS, BA, MFA

DISSERTATION

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ZANESVILLE & WESTERN:  
A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

Mark Allen Jenkins, PhD  
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Supervising Professors: Frederick Turner and Charles Hatfield

This creative dissertation is comprised of a poetry collection titled *Zanesville & Western* and a scholarly apparatus that offers background for the creation of the poetry collection. The purpose of this creative dissertation is to challenge the narrow portrayal regional poetry is typically confined to and to reconsider location as a creative impetus for poetry through the examination of other poets' work and my own work. My dissertation, which consists of a collection of original poetry accompanied by a scholarly critical essay, reconsiders the history, aesthetics, and politics of place in American poetry. Specifically, my essay argues that place is an inescapable aspect of poetry, and in my poems explore the ways in which place can represent history, both public and personal.

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## PART 1

### INTRODUCTION

I spent the first twenty-years of my life in Zanesville, Ohio. While there, I was anxious to leave for somewhere where I believed words and ideas were valued, so I chose the state university furthest from home, Miami University. After I finishing my BA, I lived in Southern Louisiana for several years, before moving to Dallas to work on a PhD. With time and distance, I have come to realize the peculiar qualities of southeastern Ohio. James Wright experienced something similar. His small, rural working-class town was all he knew until he joined the army after high school, before attending Kenyon College on the G.I. Bill (8). Wright, too, said his own "feelings about [Ohio] are complicated" (Smith 6). As a region, the Midwest is indeed hard to pin down. Stereotypes include images of cornfields, flat land, and a place to fly over. These generalizations point to a need for a local and specific account. I have tried to do just that in my poetry.

My poetry is a part of the poetic tradition I am calling poetry of place as I consciously use place to examine, reflect, and observe history, both my own and others. In my poetry, I attempt to utilize place as a creative impetus, but also testing its limits and what I'm able to do with it at this point in my poetic development.

James Wright talks about the sacredness of writing about place: "this is, for some writers, a way of participating in the life around them. I'm not saying that the value of poetry depends on writing about a place ... only that there is a kind of poetry which is a poetry of place" (6). A poet's choice of the poetry of place is an attempt to acknowledge in a real and meaningful way

that such poetry incorporates a distinct, identifiable place (Perkins 384). In his essay, Roberto Maria Dainotto insists this longing for a place is really another way of longing for utopia, as he cites Geoffrey Hartman's point that "Place does impose, then 'boundaries of some sort' on our multicultural 'chaos of form,' but such boundaries must necessarily be 'less firm' and more vague than geographical ones" (505). Writing about a specific region is a way to resist the universality of place as globalization and mass production create landscapes that are wholly unremarkable or distinct.

While there are many Midwest poets, including Carl Sandburg, William Stafford, and Lorine Niedecker, as a region, the Midwest still struggles with a clear identity, compared to New England or the South. This is even truer of southeastern Ohio, with the exception of James Wright's Martins Ferry. Little poetry has been written about the area's various historical locations and events. Southeastern Ohio represents the challenge of writing about a place. Ohio poet David Baker mentions how "My Midwest....features family farms and small towns. But it also must include conglomerate megafarms that swallow whole villages" (9). The poet's task, then, is to negotiate through the changing landscape and choose what details or subjects to include as a kind of framing device.

In considering the Midwest, William Barillas emphasizes that "more than any other part of the United States, the Midwest has been understood in relation to pastoralism" (4). He traces the Midwest Pastoral in several Midwestern writers including Theodore Roethke, James Wright, and Jim Harrison. He focuses on these writers in particular because all were compelled to write about this region (6). This familiarity is an essential aspect in writing about a region. If a writer

was not born in a region they are writing about, then certainly he or she must have inhabited it for several years.

I have lived in the south for eleven years, five in Louisiana and six in Texas. While my poems will be based on my own experience and research, they will also consider the challenges of evoking specific locales. My creative project will explore and consider how the Midwest and Southeastern Ohio did and did not shape me into the person I am today through its history, values, people, and culture. Because my poetry is a part of a long tradition of poetry of place, I want to situate myself in that tradition first.

In the second part of my scholarly essay, “Poetry of Place and the History of American poetry,” I examine the history of American poetry of place starting in the nineteenth century. I provide some context for American examination of place before going into detail about the work of Edgar Lee Masters, E.A. Robinson, and Robert Frost. These poets are precursors to Modernism, and each of them wrote about specific locations. Then I move into Modernism to examine Modernist theories of personality and the role of place in the work of Eliot and Pound. While we generally think of Modernism as impersonal and universal, I show in this section that their poetry did, indeed, often use place. Finally, I examine New Criticism and the Fugitive poets before looking at the contrasting movement, Confessionalism.

Once the history of American poetry of place is established, I move on to define place, poetry of place, and how contemporary poets consider place in this section.

Then, in my fourth section, I examine my own creative attempt writing poetry influenced by growing up and being away from Ohio as well as living in Louisiana, Texas, and other places.

The poems, together and separately, act to preserve accounts of different experiences, thoughts, and images written over several years.

## **Poetry of Place and the History of American Poetry**

American poetry of place begins in the nineteenth century with Walt Whitman. While he is not the first poet to write and publish in America, he is the first poet to focus directly on America as a worthy subject. In his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman declares “the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Prior to *Leaves of Grass*, in his 1844 essay “The Poet,” Ralph Waldo Emerson lamented America’s lack of a poet “with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials,” as “Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries... the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung.” To Emerson, America seemed poised to provide a potential poet with ample material, if only they were able to write to the occasion. Whitman saw himself as that poet, ready to make use of America in verse. His poetry set a precedent for writing about America, America as a place, a people, and even an ideal in poems like “I Hear America Singing” and “For You O Democracy.” His poetry also zeroed in on more specific places, such as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing.”

Walt Whitman is only the beginning of America’s poetry of place. In her book on twentieth century American poets, *Shifting Ground*, Bonnie Costello links writing about place with nature, an especially relevant theme for American literature as early settlers, explorers, and

visitors considered America an embodiment of Eden (2). William Cullen Bryant calls America “A living image of your own bright land” (qtd. in Costello 2). Like the landscape itself, this perspective was always in flux as Costello moves to Gertrude Stein and contemporary poet Charles Wright as further examples (2-3). Wright separates nature from landscape: “Landscape is something you determine and dominate. Nature is something that determines and dominates you” (qtd. in Costello 3). In a similar manner, Blair Whitney connects Illinois poets Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg as they

write of their native place as if it were a Garden of Eden. To them the prairies and small towns of central Illinois are places equal to man’s ‘capacity for wonder,’ and their poems are often versions of the myth of America’s Promised Land. In this Eden, natural beauty, human goodness, liberal politics and the fine arts combine to fulfill America’s best possibilities. (17)

Each has a slightly different take on what the “best possibilities” of America are and the role the landscape of Illinois plays. Whitney suggests Lindsay focuses on the promise of the future, Sandburg the present, and Masters a lost past that may never quite return (17). Poets have room to move and shift perspective on landscape and place, but role of place is still integral.

In the following sections, I demonstrate how poetry of place has always been a part of American poetry. I briefly trace American poetry from after the Civil War to the turn of the century to establish the direction American poetry was headed and recount some of the important movements and poets that lead to regionalism and some of its close associates like realism. I look at two primary factors that led to regionalism and realism: the change from a rural to a modern, urban society, and the rebellion against traditional, British poetic style. Then I go in

detail about Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Robert Frost before explaining how Modernist poets like Eliot, Pound, Moore and Stevens frequently included place in their work. Relating literary Modernism to poetry of place is crucial because the account of Modernism is too often one that suggests Modernists and their works are something apart from cultural and geographical surroundings. I will show how this account is derived from particular critics and poets such as Charles Bernstein and Majorie Perloff who have misread Modernism. From there, I briefly explain how confessional poets used place to ground their poems in real settings and provide realism for their confessions.

The point of this history is not to provide an exhaustive study of poetry of place in all of American literature, but rather to provide snapshots that demonstrate the role of place. I briefly situate poetry of place before going into detail about a few American poets, but these few examples show the American poetic preoccupation with place. My own work is a continuation of this tradition, especially of the way Modernism treated place. By reassessing and then tracing place through modern American poetry, I hope to provide context for my own poems.

## **The Context of American Poetry of Place**

To consider the role of place in American poetry, it is necessary to trace the cultural currents that influenced it. One of the major factors was the urbanization that accompanied industrialization after the end of the Civil War. This upheaval in American life led to the beginnings of a loss of regional distinctions. As Perkins recounts, “The United States seemed a newer, rawer land than it seemed before the Civil War. Less stable, less endowed with traditional

values” (94). Sundquist considers that both realism and regionalism emerged from the 1870 to the 1900s

as a developing series of responses to the transformation of land into capital, of raw materials into products, of agrarian blues into urban blues, and of private experience into public property, then the city appears as one region among others, part of the national network of modernization actualized as much by the ties of language and literature as by new railroad lines and telegraph wires. (501)

The poetry of place developed through regionalism and realism is a response to the loss of regional distinctions happening through the modernization of America.

While fiction had a strong grounding in the realistic novels of the eighteenth century, poetry was often seen as an escape from reality. The realism embodied in fiction could be used to ponder the changes happening in America, but poetry had no such mechanism. Poetry was a part of the culture, not a means to examine reality. As Perkins puts it, “There was a yearning for ‘culture’ in America” though this broad desire is difficult to define (95). Still, “many educated Americans had a remarkably literal faith in culture and cultural objects” as poetry was trapped between extremes of shalls and shall nots: “beautiful, elevating, refined, traditional, and ideal” but never “vulgar, homespun, idiosyncratic, realistic, [or] deflating.” Leading poets believed “the role of poetry was to maintain the ‘spiritual’ side of life. If it was out of touch with American reality, it was in touch, poetry lovers felt, with what Americans needed,” namely, a kind of escape (95). Readers of poetry did not want poetic realism; they wanted the escape that poetry provided.

While novelists such as Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Edith Wharton, and others “established the undeniable importance of American fiction” (Beach 7), the two most esteemed American poets—Walt Whitman and James Greenleaf Whittier—both died in 1892. In the 1890s, poets such as Frost and Stevens were still maturing, while Robinson was writing and publishing in obscurity. Poetic innovation languished and faltered, as the poets that remained “settled for an uncontroversial mediocrity of ideas, form and rhetoric” (7). Even Whitman, himself, was not popular for most of the nineteenth century, and Dickinson was unknown (Shucard 20).

Instead, many American poets were influenced by the Genteel poets, a major movement in American poetry that began in the late nineteenth century and lasted until just before World War I. Genteel poets opposed realism in poetry and instead advocated for poets to focus on the ethereal while also suggesting poetry was in a state of decline. Elizabeth Renkin recounts genteel proponents were “stuck in a hopelessly idealist late-Romantic mode.” This account, she suggests, claims “American poetry produced little of value between Whitman and Dickinson and the modernists” (135). They believed poetry as a genre was in decline. Edmund Clarence Stedman advanced this idea in 1885, coining the phrase “Twilight of the poets.” He, like most genteel poets, insisted that “the imagination, paradoxical as it may seem, has been most heightened and sustained by the contemplation of natural objects, rather as they seem to be than as we know they are. For to the pure and absorbed spirit it is the ideal only that seems real” (qtd. in Renker 138). John Tomisik supports Renker when he says “the genteel writers were dedicated to expressing ‘the beautiful-’not ‘the real’” (qtd. in Renker 138). Stedman and his followers, like Thomas Bailey Aldrich, believed realism was a fad that poetry would outlast because poetry and realism

were incompatible. The position originated from leading magazine editors like Aldrich who embraced “Twilight of the poets” as did several poets who even used the term as a title for poems and wrote essays praising Stedman (139). The New York Group, one subgroup of genteel poets, included Elizabeth Stoddard, Bayard Taylor, George Baker, and Edmund Clarence Stedman (Shucard, Moramarco, and Sullivan 21). These genteel poets were the conservative side of American poetry. Shucard, Moramarco, and Sullivan note that

the literary scene in the United States toward the end of the century divided itself between conservatives and liberals. The conservatives vested in such as Thomas Baily Aldrich, saw themselves manning the trenches of immutable sancrosanct, and romantic American culture against dangerous forces of realists, Naturalists, free-verse poets, and other such radicals represented by the likes of Emily Dickinson and Stephen Crane.

(21-22)

Daniel Aaron agrees this movement opposed “any movement that might endanger, in the indicative phrase of the very ‘genteel’ Henry van Dyke, ‘the spiritual rootage of art’” (735). Unfortunately the genteel movement’s focus on spiritual matters also did little to advance American poetry. One of their contemporary critics, Van Wyck Brooks, lamented how “No ‘true’ revolution was possible,’ ...until ‘a race of arts, profound and sincere, have brought us face-to-face with our own experience’” (qtd. in Aaron 738).

In addition to American poetry’s preoccupation with the spiritual and ideal as seen through the genteel poets, most nineteenth-century American poetry mimicked English styles and forms. The poets themselves often desired English recognition for their poetry. For most Americans, “the greatest writers of the language were English, not Americans” (Perkins 91). According to

Ezra Pound, writing in 1942, “The U.S. thirty years ago was still a colony of London as far as culture was concerned” (91). At the turn of the century, it was often difficult to separate American poets from their English counterparts as American poets themselves felt as if the English styles determined great poetry. The poetic styles were English, yet the content was often American: “Most poets of the 1890’s fall into a style not much distinguished from that of the more traditional English poets, but not closely imitative either, and they were recognizably American in their subject matter” (Perkins 91). As Perkins goes on to explain, some American poets rejected “whatever they took to be English— generally speaking, the highbrow, sophisticated, and genteel” while others “exaggerated ‘American’ qualities because they were really ashamed or dubious of them” (92). They also were “frequently ready to embrace whatever standards and ideas were established in the literary center” (92).

American poets weren’t content to be published in their local paper or regional magazine. They wanted national or international approval; “they wanted the approval to be authoritative and the authority was London” (Perkins 92). A close second to London was the American east coast. To poets of the Midwest and West, “the prestige of England enveloped and haloed what was generally referred to as ‘the east;’ New York, Boston...because most of the leading American writers had dwelt there” (92). For example, after the publication of his first two books, Edgar Allen Robinson moved to New York City from Maine. To really practice their craft, American poets felt the pull to move east. This dislocation didn’t necessarily signal a break from the poets’ geographical origins, and the move eastward may have accidentally provided crucial distance for some writers.

The mimicry of English forms in American poetry stems from the same impulse to embrace spirituality or escapism, but it eventually gave way to poetry more distinctly American. The two changes already described—the urbanization of America, which led to a loss of regional distinctions, and the copying of English poetic forms—eventually led to a poetic embrace of America itself. Writing about America became one way to rebel against English influence. At the same time, the focus on America helped to create a uniquely American poetry: “Whatever their motives, many poets sought to portray American life, character, attitudes, and feelings— often in association with a particular region— and to do so in a distinctly American style, which usually they took to be plain, colloquial (sometimes in dialect), low-keyed, and humorous” (92-93). Notice Perkins’s emphasis on “particular regions” that played a major role in the “distinctly American style.” E.A. Robinson is Perkins’s main example as he looked toward Modernism. Poet Louise Bogan believed his poetry was “one of the hinges upon which American poetry was able to turn from the sentimentality of the nineties toward modern veracity and psychological truth” (qtd. in Beach 9).

Like any literary reaction, the move away from English forms to a more “distinctly American” poetry was not uniform in intensity: “The protest on behalf of America could involve, at one extreme, nothing more than the description of American landscape in an idiom and form borrowed from British Models.... or it could involve radical and thoroughgoing changes in poetic language and sensibility” (93). Many poets felt a nationalist duty to “express an American identity” yet “as a writer, however, he may fear that to be American is necessarily to be inferior” (93). This tension caused rebelling poets to consider what Europe might like least about America: “democratic vulgarity and bad tastes, breeziness, brashness, quirky inventiveness”

balanced against a need to “identify with whatever virtues he supposed Europe has and America lacks—depth of culture, tradition, discipline, artistic sophistication, tragic awareness, and modern sensibility” (93-94).

To see how the rebellion against English forms began to change by the beginning of the twentieth century, we can look to Carl Sandburg’s “Chicago” (1914), which is a great example of a new American poetry grounded in realism and precise language:

Hog Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders:

In the poem’s personification of the city, the speaker has no trouble praising the city while discussing some of its seedier aspects as well: “They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women / under the gas lamps luring the farm boys. / And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill / and go free to kill again.” This poem demonstrates how a poet can write about their surroundings in a nuanced way that neither ignores negative parts of the place described, but also manages to praise it. It also shows how regional landscapes are an important part of America.

## **Masters, Robinson, and Frost: The Move Toward Modernism**

According to David Perkins, regionalism in American poetry often occurred unintentionally as poets wrote in geographic isolation (86). In other words, at the turn of the century, many poets in America, such as Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, and Edwin Arlington Robinson, wrote what we would call regional poetry. They wrote about what was readily available, namely the space and place around them. Perkins's account seems to understate Regionalism's place as a major movement in American literature, however. To demonstrate how place has been always been a part of American poetry, I have chosen three examples from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By closely examining selected works of Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Robert Frost, I will be able to show how poetry of place was an important part of American poetry and a precursor to American Modernism.

### **Edgar Lee Masters's Spoon River Anthology**

Masters' best known work, *Spoon River Anthology*, takes place in a small town based on his own childhood in rural Illinois (250). When this collection was first published in 1915, Pound exclaimed "At Last! At last America has discovered a poet" (qtd. in Weber 100). Based on his experience as a lawyer in the small towns of Petersburg and Lewiston, Illinois, Masters's poems criticize "the idealization of small-town life in America and so were precursors of the fiction of Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson" (Shucard, Moramarco, and Sullivan 52 ). Charles

Burgess recounts in detail some of the more specific events Masters worked into the Spoon River poems “including bank failures in both villages, the burning of the Fulton County Courthouse on December 14, 1894, and a trial of the arsonist and legal battle on building a new courthouse” (65). Masters made ample use of his experience in rural Illinois in his poetry, demonstrating how place can be used in poetry. When first published, early critics deemed that “he was not writing poetry at all but merely chopped up prose, that he simply rearranged on the page to resemble poetry” (Flanagan 24 ). Another reviewer wondered if “any community ever existed which was in so much in need of moral prophylaxis as Spoon River with its complement of drunkards, thieves, suicides, murders, and adulterers” while also acknowledging such events were more likely to be known in a small town compared to a large, anonymous city (29). Whitney sees in Masters’s Spoon River poetry, characters drawing strength from the landscape, such as Angela Sanger, whose energy ebbs and flows with the seasons: “And what were last year’s failures, frosts and worms? / I would plan again for the joy of growing things; / Fight for the corn of life, for the blossoms of beauty” (qtd. in Whitney 17). These transitory texts made use of regionalism while also offering psychological themes such as alienation and depression, along with styles taken up later by Modernists.

### **E. A. Robinson**

Along with Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson used small town life as the basis for his poetic sequences. Born in 1869, Robinson is one of the oldest regionalist poets by the turn of the century. Beach considers him “America’s most important poet during the period from the

1890's until the mid-1910s" (9). Perkins agrees that Robinson's importance should not be understated: "Modern poetry in America begins with Robinson," and "the 1890s in America saw in Robinson an assimilation of methods and purposes usually associated with prose" (102). As a transitory poet, his work is difficult to classify as he has no single predecessor, he read widely, and his work seems to anticipate other poets like Frost and Stevens (Perkins 123). Some critics like Winters have connected his style to British writers including Robert Browning, Crabbe, and Kipling (21). Winters considers the similarities between Robinson's poetry and Crabbe's use of the impersonal in his poetry, as well as Browning's use of the dramatic monologue or persona poems (21-23).

Perkins believes Robinson is rightly considered a Realist, as his work shares some traits with poets like Masters and Sandburg, though not to the level of most realist novelists like Zola. Robinson used forms similar to those used by "his optimistic romantic predecessors, including Whittier, Holmes, Longfellow, and Bryant" (Shucard, Moramarco, and Sullivan 33). Though he admired Wordsworth, Robinson was not a nature poet. He identified with Wordsworth's advocating in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry use more "subject matter taken from common life and presented in a language really used by men" (123). Like Frost and Wordsworth, Robinson tried to "bring poetry back into touch with life; to take it out of the drawing room, out of the realm of hearts and flowers, and on to drab small town streets and dusty county roads; to tell the stories of humdrum and even sordid lives and show that these were after all the lives of human beings" (Barnard 2).

Yvor Winters acknowledges a general influence of New England upon Robinson, "the influence of a place and culture upon his mind and character" though he is unable to link him to

any particular New England writer (20). Poems like “Richard Cory” and “Miniver Cheevy” are strong examples of sketches that come from close knowledge of small town life and mentality. Beach notes he “was interested in the personal histories of the people he encountered, and in using these portraits to reflect the hypocrisy and spiritual void of his times” (10). Shucard, Moramarco, and Sullivan say that Robinson “articulated the world from behind the eyes of his Tilbury Town denizens—sad romantics, defeated men driven to drink or suicide, failures of any differing stripes” (33). These poems could only have come from someone like Robinson who utilized first-hand experience of his characters who “are weak or insignificant in the eye of the world, but who sustain themselves in loneliness on some kind of inner integrity” (Winters 19).

Robinson’s poetry closely mirrored his own life, especially his birthplace in rural Maine: “The townspeople of Gardiner on which his poems are based appear to have suffered from many of the same problems as Robinson himself: suicide, Alcoholism, tragic loneliness, and a general sense of failure and unfulfilled promise” (Beach 10). His Father died during his second year at Harvard, forcing him to come home to a failing family fortune managed by older brothers, one who was an alcoholic and the other a morphine addict (Perkins 121). Robinson’s use of the fictional town of Tilbury based on his real-life home town allowed his poetry to have a connection to the real world while working in characters based on his family and neighbors. Fictionalizing it allowed a freedom in terms of distance and approach. “There is poetry in all types of humanity—even in lawyers and horse-jockeys,” he once wrote a friend (qtd. In Barnard 2). Using a completely fictionalized town might lose a connection to realism, while using a completely accurate representation would prove too constraining. His poems are deeply linked to

place, even if they don't invoke a specific small town. Through his closely-linked poems about a fictional town, Robinson manages to convey the mentality of small-town America.

## **Robert Frost**

Robert Frost lived in Derry, New Hampshire for eleven years, enacting many of the activities he wrote about in his poems. It was Frost's "authenticity of this outdoor experience" that made "him a very different poet from his more 'genteel' contemporaries" (Beach 14). Further, Frost rejected American Romanticism and instead "set out to write poetry more grounded in the reality of rural life and the immediacy of spoken language" (14). His insistence of those two things—rural life and spoken language—put him at odds with both the Genteels who came before him and his contemporary Modernists. He separated himself from Modernists as he stuck to more traditional forms of poetry, beginning with his rejection of Imagism (15). Pound and Flint, key practitioners and supporters of Imagism,

responded enthusiastically to *A Boy's Will* when it appeared in 1913 and Pound encouraged Frost to write his next book in free verse, Frost decided in the summer of 1914 that he was most interested in cultivating 'the hearing imagination' rather than 'the kind that merely see things.' (15)

While "clearly an oversimplification" of Imagism, "it allowed Frost to distance himself from what was happening in the poetic avant-garde and thus to formulate his own poetic theories" (15). His reluctance to adhere to any established movement meant both his peers and critics were unable to neatly categorize his poetry.

Frost was not interested in writing Modernist poetry or making a radical break with past poetic forms: “Frost’s poetry differed from that of the modernists in several respects in its adherence to a traditional formalism...in the ordinariness and rustic simplicity of its subject matter; in resolutely narrative quality; and in its lack of what modernists...might consider the transformative power of the poetic imagination” (Beach 15). Beach notes how “Stevens, for example, denigrated Frost for writing poems about ‘things,’ suggesting that Frost’s poems remained too closely to the real world as we perceive rather than attempting to transform or transcend our everyday experience of that world” (15). Further, he challenges, “Frost was a nature poet, but not in the romantic sense of a poet who celebrates the beauty or pastoral simplicity of nature” (19). His poetry is concerned with nature, it takes place in nature, but it also uses nature to consider a wide range of themes and beliefs in poems like “After Picking Apples” or “Birches.” In Frost’s poems, nature is anything but simple or merely beautiful.

Frost’s poetry complicates long held beliefs about regionalist poets and poems. Critics of regionalism have suggested that regional poetry’s focus on place comes at a cost of impact, i.e. that few, if any, readers outside of the poet’s region would understand or even be interested in poetry from a particular region. In addition, regional poetry is generally assumed to be inferior. Frost, by contrast, “cannily used region as a form of poetic and personal self-fashioning” (Duvall 252). While certainly a poet of place, he is also much more than a New England poet. His poetry traces the changes in New England’s landscape as well as man’s changing relationship with nature itself.

Henry Hart suggests that Robert Frost is not just a New England poet, but rather a poet equally influenced by his childhood and other places from his life. His early childhood in San

Francisco ended with his father's untimely death. At that point, Frost, his mother, and his sister all moved to Massachusetts to live with his grandparents. Aside from his early childhood spent in California, Frost also spent time away from New England and America, writing of these places from a distance. David Orr mentions in his book-length consideration of "The Road Not Taken" that Frost's most famous poem was written while in England, largely inspired by regular walks with his friend Edward Thomas who often apologized when a walk's destination seemed lackluster compared to a different walk (29). In a similar detail, Robert Crawford connects "Mending Wall" to a visit to Scotland in 1913: "The poem is written in England, sparked off by details seen in Scotland, drawing mainly on New England memories," yet "all of these are so deeply embedded in the end-product that their foreignness is lost totally. To see this happening is to pay tribute to Frost's skill: It is also to see just how much his New England vision, however much grounded in actual experience, is a construct drawing on various, sometimes remote sources" (qtd. in Hart 48). These two surprising revelations about the factual place Frost was writing about in two of his most famous poems complicates his New England-ness but also suggest that New England permeates his writing even when he wasn't necessarily dwelling or specifically writing about it.

Another key part of Frost's popular association with New England came from the persona he quickly adopted while reading his poetry in public. The question is whether his rural sage persona was an act or not. Orr believes that while Frost "sounded like a witty rural sage; there may be some part of him that *was* a witty, rural sage" (43). In other words, Frost may be considered a regionalist poet for more than just his poetry. His public persona as the rural sage helped fan the regionalist perception of him and his poetry. In reality, Frost's poetry bridges

colloquial regionalism and Modernism, much like Masters and Robinson did. Yet Frost maintained the rural, regionalist persona.

In recounting early Frost biographical reviewers, Hart notes that many readers expressed surprise that Frost, like Yeats, constructed “a persona that was, in many aspects, antithetical to his actual personality” (42). He was not the Yankee poet everyone assumed he would be. Reviewer and poet James Dickey believed Frost’s readers “had chiseled an idealized image of Frost ‘in a kind of Mount Rushmore’” (qtd. in Hart 43). Their beliefs about Frost’s person threatened to overwrite his actual biography, but also require some critical unpacking. Perkins, for one, is less willing to completely separate Frost from his persona, the idea of “Frost as a Yankee farmer-poet is accurate but may be qualified” (228). Perkins points out that Frost did live on and run several farms, but he was never solely dependent on farming for his livelihood (228). He could go for long walks or if he did need money, he taught “first in nearby schools and later in colleges, especially Amherst. Above all he thought of himself as a poet” (228-229). It’s not so much then that Frost didn’t mend fences or tend crops. Farming was just one of many occupations for Frost when he wasn’t writing. He used his first-hand experience as way to research rural New England and its inhabitants.

Living in rural New England on the farm that his grandfather purchased certainly influenced his writing. Place often helped his poetry make a point, and sometimes, place was the point. For Costello, Frost’s poetry considers a location’s change, especially decay, that occurs over time. She starts her chapter on Frost with “Oven Bird,” a poem she argues considers modernity and morality: “‘The Fall’ has left our garden of the world a ‘diminished thing’ ” (19). This “diminished thing” represents a problem his poetry consistently attempts to explore. His

poems regularly constitute “a poetry of crossing... nature affected by and affecting human presence... the mind seeks and creates patterns in time, which struggle against the anti-landscapes of undifferentiated wilderness, the frozen swamps and desert places we cannot inhabit” (19). Poems like “The Road Not Taken” or “Stopping by a Woods on a Snowy Evening,” consider wild spaces the poems’ speakers chose not to inhabit, such as a road where he “looked down one as far as I could / To where it bent in the undergrowth” as he chooses to continue on the other path (103). The latter poem’s speaker stops and gazes at an uninhabited forest for some time but decides he has too many other “promises to keep” to investigate (207).

In 1894, after dropping out of college and being rejected by Eleanor White, one of his early loves, Frost journeyed to the border between Virginia and North Carolina, an area he called the “Great Dismal Swamp.” This phrase would also become his term for whenever he felt which he believes comes from the opening line of the poem “The Slave in The Dismal Swamp” by Longfellow (Costello 57). These complications in his personal life begin to reveal that Frost and his poetry are much more complex figures than popular notions might imply. Frost’s poems come from a place of familiarity with nature. Its speakers have inhabited these spaces for most of their lives. They often know these spaces as well as they might know a family member or lover. This is one way, Costello suggests, Frost differs from his contemporaries and predecessors:

If American landscape tradition reflects the Enlightenment episteme in which nature is an object of contemplative or material possessions, Frost’s landscapes revert to an older model in which our relation to nature is one of resemblance rather than mastery. Yet it emerges in a post-Enlightenment context and cannot simply return to old ways of knowing. The poet does not stand outside or above a vista, but finds himself in the middle

of things, occupying a part as he discourses on or with another part, or at most imagining the correspondences between elements in a landscape. (23-24)

A poet like Frost is a part of a landscape up against other landscapes. His preoccupation with nature and rural life contrasts with the Modernists like Pound and Eliot, who preferred to consider more civilized, urban settings. Nineteenth-century romantics and transcendentalists would seem to have written too much about nature, though it is also a question of how they wrote about it. Costello insists Frost's "concern with frame and flux is a sign of his modernity, the nerve of these reflections need not depict contemporary life" (24). In other words, a poem's Modernist tendencies are what define a poem as Modernist, not its subject or setting. This revision of the term is especially useful here in discussing and providing examples of how some Modernist poets considered place.

### **Modernism and Place: A Re-Evaluation**

By one account, Modernist texts are not supposed to bear any strong connection to the culture and place they were created in, but should instead stand apart as self-sufficient and self-referential. Some Modernists attack regional poets such as Frost whose poetry did not match their Modernist aesthetics because they wanted a sparse poetry that could stand on its own without including too much of the poet's personality or biography. Eliot deemed Frost a poet "specializing in New England Torpor" (qtd. in Orr 34). What complicates the Modernists' criticism is that their own poetry often connects to place and time, in ways similar to those they

criticize. Eliot's "The Wasteland" and Stevens's travels in poems like "Anecdote of a Jar" and many of his Florida poems are certainly tied to place and are rooted in their time.

One way to look at the early twentieth-century poets like E. A. Robinson, Carl Sandburg, Thomas Hardy, and William Butler Yeats is that they set poetry on a course towards Modernism. Frost certainly rejected most Victorian and Romantic poetry, whose ornate language and emotions contrasted sharply with his plainspoken language that quickly became part of his Yankee farmer persona. Frost believed "poetic diction and verbal melody had been carried as far as they could and spoken language was the only possible source of a new poetic music" (Perkins 233). This plain-spokenness is often traced back to Wordsworth and appears in other poets like Robinson, Sandburg, or William Carlos Williams (234).

Modernists, meanwhile, thought of poetry of place in similar, antiquated terms, and the Modernist outward rejection of place dominated twentieth-century poetry criticism. Elizabeth Renker says that "twentieth century critics who promulgated this account reproduced the elements of a story already circulating during the last quarter of the nineteenth century" (135). The attitude that poetry of place is antiquated persists to this day as Charbonneau notes that most critics prefer to focus on aesthetic movements over geographic movements such as the New York School, the Black Mountain poets, and the Beatniks, to name a few: "even where a locale or region was part of the very name by which a group was identified, that locale or region rarely figures prominently in the discussions of poetry" (2). The lone exception are the Fugitives, who he rightly notes must be discussed in conjunction with place. Still, this lone group "has received relatively little treatment in the last two decades" (2). Charbonneau argues that it's not so much that there are no regional poets or poetries, it's that critics choose not to focus on this type of

poetry. He points to the regional anthologies poets regularly assemble that critics frequently ignore (3). This disconnect is one that is slowly fading in more recent decades as the importance of local and place becomes a central cultural issue. While my own poetry is certainly a part of this new poetic appreciation of place, it is also a part of the larger experience of place that has always been a part of American poetry.

The Modernists did, indeed, eschew regionalism. Local color was already in decline by the end of the nineteenth century, and the Modernists rejected it whole-heartedly. But seeing Modernism as the “antithesis of regionalism” is a misconception argues Duvall in “Regionalism in American Modernism” (242). Charbonneau upholds the binary, however. According to him, if “place has a determinant role in communal and individual identity, then modernism has little focus on place, if any” (3). As an example of the distaste Modernists had for their predecessors, Duvall quotes Richard Alderington’s contrast of the Georgian poets with Ezra Pound:

The Georgians were regional in their outlook and in love of littleness. They took a little trip for a little weekend to a little cottage where they wrote a little poem on a little theme. Ezra was a citizen of the world, both mentally and as a fact. He went off to Paris or Vienna with vastly less fuss than Georgian affronting the perils of the Costwolds.

(qtd. in Charbonneau 4)

An over-focus on the local is readily equated with small-mindedness, as writers fetishized every trip, no matter how mundane. Regionalism’s decline is also linked to the decline of a region’s power, or “a decline in the power of region to define the nation” (4). William Dean Howell, who championed regional fiction, noticed this decline of regionalism at the end of the century. If we assume that the Modernists are not regionalists, then it is easy to read them that way.

While Modernists have often been identified with autonomous, self-contained works of art, Siraganian challenges the idea that Modernism claims that any work of art should be detached from the world, especially in terms of meaning. For her, "an art object's autonomy means not a liberation from the whole world but freedom from others ascribing meanings to art objects" (4). A self-contained work was created somewhere specific. In short, the role of place in Modernism needs acknowledgement, even recovery, to fully appreciate place as an important part of American poetry. It is especially important to demonstrate that regionalism was not replaced by Modernism but that many Modernist poets in fact were still influenced by place, however limited or unintentional.

Modernism regularly privileged urban settings over rural landscapes as the movement was primarily urban. Duvall notes that the international movement of Modernism is usually associated with "urban centers" instead of rural places. Modernist writers were much more likely to move to large cities to meet other writers and artists. He is also quick to point out that many writers associated with Modernism are not normally associated with their place of birth: "No one would call Eliot (born in St. Louis, Missouri) a Midwestern writer. Nor, for that matter, would Midwestern literature typically claim Hemingway or Fitzgerald" (242). In other words, Modernist writers are often considered Modernists above all else.

Modernism is itself a constraining, overused term and, like most -isms, is attached by critics to writers. David Perkins acknowledges that his use of the phrase "high Modernist mode is really a synthesis of diverse types of poetry that had been created and made available as resources or models in writing during the thirty years between 1890 and 1920" (449). Quentin Anderson likewise agrees that it is less a unified school or movement but rather "suggests that

they represent a break with the past” (696). Duvall, though, broadens Modernism’s time span to include “all imaginative writing that responds to the intense forces of modernization that occur from the 1890s to the eve of World War II, then we might speak of a broader range of writers, often those whose regionalism is associated with realism and naturalism, who contribute to an understanding of Modernism” (243). As an example of his wider use of Modernism, he pinpoints key texts that “all laid ground for Modernism prior to 1914” including work by Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Du Bois. This broadening is not so much an explosion of the Modernist canon, but an acknowledgment that many texts and writers typically thought of as outside Modernism were important influences to the movement as they provided Modernists raw materials

Almost as much as Modernism, Regionalism is itself a difficult term to pinpoint. Unlike Modernism, it’s a term in need of recovery. Duvall argues that “For much of its history, the term was synonymous with the phrase ‘writers of local color,’ a designation frequently used to devalue woman writers by signaling that they were of only regional, not national, importance” (243). Considered a subcategory of Realism and Naturalism, it was also used to label work that took place in a rural setting as opposed to the expected urban setting of Modernist work (Duvall 243). For most of its existence, Regionalism has been “a minoritizing gesture, one relegating the regional text to a supplemental status in the canon of a national literature” (243). Duvall notes the term’s recent recovery by feminist critics to “reclaim certain women authors” who might otherwise be lost to obscurity (243). While Duvall admits that, while these texts may not be obviously modern, they expand “our sense of the modern” (243). Still, as these Regionalist critics primarily focus on fiction and white women in the pursuit of rewriting the canon, he argues that their revitalization of regionalism has its limits.

There have been some attempts to separate regionalism from some of the cultural and critical baggage the term often invokes. Duvall considers Fetterly and Pryse leaders of this particular approach to Regionalism as editors of an anthology and other critical work. He notes their desire to “liberate regionalist fiction from its subservient relation to realism, and in a bold stroke they radically devalue the importance of region in regionalism on the grounds that regions ‘are far more local and specific than’ designations as the South, Midwest, and the Northeast” (244). The common regional labels have lost what little impact or focus they had if they ever did have such a focus. They make this point because they believe regionalism should be considered “less as a term of geographical determinism and more a discourse or a mode of analysis, a vantage point within the network of power relations that provides a location for critique and resistance” (qtd. in Duvall 244). They see it as a “tool for critique of hierarchies based on gender as well as race, class, age, and economic resources.... in short, they argue, if a text does not critique hierarchies, it cannot be regionalist” (244). Their distorted definition of regionalism arbitrarily excludes obvious regional texts and authors simply because they are not political enough or are not the right kind of political for Fetterly and Pryse. Using their definition, “Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) ... falls short of regionalism because, whatever it may or may not say about race, it ‘does not problematize gender’ ” (qtd. in Duvall 244). Despite a problematic view of regionalism, he believes that their “sense that regionalism is a form of critique rather than a type of geographical determinism” (245) allows critics to consider writers from different regions that share commonalities when before they would be considered too disparate for such analysis. He demonstrates this point through analysis of Kate Chopin and Sui Sin Far to show how two female writers utilize setting—rural and urban, respectively—to “focus

their gender critique through the lens of agricultural modernization” (246). Focusing on connections between writers of different regions provides yet another way to consider how themes transcend specific places but also that place can affect these themes in some manner as well.

Increasingly, scholars have argued that Modernism is not a unified aesthetic, but a collection of writers who wrote approximately during the same time period. Each so-called Modernist had unique, but often overlapping ideas and beliefs. Davis and Jenkins mention that even in the United States alone, “America in the modernist period was also the site of ideological conflicts between versions of cultural nationalism and cultural *localism*” (20). Modernism comes in many varieties as a “synthesis of diverse types of poetry that had gradually been created and made available as resources or models in writing during the thirty years between 1890 and 1920” (449). Perkins traces several key poets whose “evolution into modernism... come as close as possible to the actual development of Modernist poetry as it took place” (451). This gradual change into Modernism by most of its practitioners underscores the point that writers were influenced by their predecessors, and literature does not neatly fit into a timeline.

If we do not ascribe a unified aesthetic to Modernism, then we can begin to see once again the role of the regional in Modernist poetry. Modernism and writing about place may initially seem opposed, as Modernists like Pound and Eliot are usually understood to advocate for poetry that stands outside of time and place as part of desire to break with the immediate poetic tradition and make a new self-contained poetry. However, as many critics now argue, there is not just one kind of Modernism, but many types of Modernism. As Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy” argues, despite Eliot and his follower’s best attempts and

intentions, their poetry was influenced and inspired by outside factors that include where and when they wrote. William Carlos Williams believed that a writer will naturally include "facts" from the outside world in their texts, even if by accident (Siraganian 19). Therefore, while a poet may claim that place is not an important element in their work, some elements of their current location will always seep in. To overlook these influences is to ignore part of the writing process.

Lisa Siraganian argues that despite their best intentions Modernist poets always included something of their locales: "The modernists I discuss have a very different account how autonomy works because they are rarely committed to the art object's resistance to or rejection of society; instead, they believe that the art object remains immune from society's *meaning*" (17). Siraganian is arguing here for a close reading of Modernism through Modernism itself instead of considering it through New Criticism or some other lens that may distort it. While I have suggested that Modernism is a label that strains under close scrutiny, it is still often the most appropriate label for many of the writers under consideration in this section, and I will continue to use it as a nominative to describe poetry between the two world wars.

It is not so much that place and the outside world have no place in Modernist poetry. Instead, later critics have bent Modernism to fit their own beliefs, in particular by overprivileging or even misapplying Eliot's aesthetics and attempting to place New Critical aesthetics over Modernist ones. Place did, in fact, have a role in Modernist poetry. In particular, a modern, urban setting provided a ready way for Modernists, many of which lived in urban areas, to consider the plight of the urban subject herself, as she struggled with pollution, isolation, and claustrophobia.

The modern urban city is a common setting in Eliot's poetry. Eliot was influenced by French symbolists like Baudelaire and Laforgue who wrote about "the modern urban experience" which

had previously been considered unpoetic (Beach 37; Galand 27). Eliot claims it was Baudelaire who taught him “of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis” (qtd. in Beach 37). The settings in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” for example, are “modern, urban, and nocturnal” (39). That this love poem takes place in a hellish urban setting is a reversal of a pastoral love poem, including the lack of any love as the speaker is too timid or paralyzed to even talk to any of the women alluded to throughout the poem. No specific urban locale is mentioned, but the setting is central to the mood and tone of the poem. Urban settings continue in other poems like “Preludes,” a poem that consists almost entirely of urban images from the opening lines, “The winter evening settles down / With small of steaks in passageways” to “His soul stretched tight across the skies / That fade behind a city block” (13-14). The modern city is an important way for Eliot to subtly evoke emotions like disgust, dread, and isolation. Without these images, Eliot’s poems would lose their impact and certainly their place as representative Modernist poems.

T. S. Eliot’s impersonal theory, one of the most important ideas in modernist poetry, comes from his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In it, Eliot reacted against Romanticism, as well as Victorian and Genteel poetry of the nineteenth century, as he advocated for a more cerebral and restrained poetry that built upon past poets and avoided excessive emotion, especially emotion not connected to anything complex or meaningful. He himself would be influenced by French Symbolists like Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Rimbaud who themselves were rebelling against Romanticism (Perkins 493). Also, by past poets, Eliot does not necessarily mean immediate predecessors, as one his main influences was Dante.

Eliot believes the best poems will include variations on subjects and themes considered by previous poets. He argues that while critics might praise a poet for their originality or individuality, he insists a critic who does this is often praising that which is most like “those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (38). The past provides purpose and meaning for poetry. The relationship between past and present is not static or one-way. Instead, “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (39). A poet should have a strong understanding of past poets and history in general. Only through this knowledge is the poet able to create something new and meaningful.

Through his use of the term “impersonality,” Eliot argues that a poet’s personality should be a small part of a finished poem because the poet as medium should take personality’s place. Poetry comes about at the moment when the poet’s awareness of history and past poetry are related in the poet’s mind. The poem will come out of the poet, but will not seem of the poet. He uses the term “personality” in this essay to label personal feelings, what Wordsworth would call emotions, especially those not connected to something significant with a history a poet can tap into. For Eliot, a poet should remove all traces of emotion and personality from their poetry. Eliot takes issue with Wordsworth’s notion that poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquility,” and deems it “an inexact formula” as emotions are one minimal part of the writing process, “for it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor without distortion of meaning, tranquility” (43). In fact, “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (40). Outside, prior experience is not the only way to write a poem, and, at least for Eliot, most of the hard work should happen while the poet is writing, including collecting experiences, which broadly speaking, includes phrases, images, and words, that come together until it is enough to

write a poem. While emotion is a necessary part of drafting an original poem that builds on the poetic tradition, emotions should not remain in the final draft. He argues the opposite of Wordsworth: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion” (43).

This does not mean, however, that the poet is nowhere to be found in the poem. Robert Archambeau, paraphrasing Frank Lentricchia, puts it this way: “the poet’s imagination becomes not just a theater of individual urges, fears, and desires: it becomes a place in which those urges and desires take on meanings derived from a tradition larger and wiser than the individual.”

Geoffrey O’Brien follows this line of criticism:

*The Waste Land* stands as the *ars poetica* of this impersonal style: personal ‘feelings’ are deployed in a relentless citational environment such that they assume the quality of quotation, while the quotations move towards the condition of original speech.

Experience cannot be directly transferred to the page as poetry, but has to instead undergo some kind of change as part of a poet’s writing process, what he calls the ‘annihilation’ of personality.

Eliot utilized his knowledge of his predecessors and history to choose quotations, myths, and imagery throughout the poem.

Eliot’s impersonalization makes it difficult to know the exact role something like place has in a finished poem, since “Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man the personality” (Eliot 42). Eliot’s impersonalization is an attempt to remove or conceal any traces of reality that inspired the poem, but are not deemed essential or important to the poet’s intention. Wimsatt and Beardsley agree, arguing “Poetry succeeds

because all or most of what is said or is implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded” (1375). The poet’s biography is little to no use for understanding, it seems to argue, though it might be more appropriate to warn readers not to overuse biography in place of close reading.

This insistence on close reading over intention can lead to a reconsideration of place in Modernist poetry. A Modernist may say they didn’t intend to write about place, but readers can (and should) only judge the finished text on its own merits (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1375). J. P. Spingam considers this belief when he says, “The poet’s aim must be adjusted at the moment of the creative act, that is to say, by the art of the poem itself” (qtd. In Wimsatt and Beardsley 1375). This adjustment is one way to explain intention, namely that a poet’s intention should shape the poem. If a poet decides that where or when the poem was written is not important to the poem’s purpose, then the poet should remove or reduce traces of both from the poem. Thus, Eliot may desire to remove traces of place from *The Waste Land*, for example, but recent scholars still connect his poetry to London and other places he knew from growing up in St. Louis and spending summers in New England.

Reading or otherwise encountering a work of art will provide an insight that a person will understand, perhaps even identify with, but it will go beyond a mere retelling or re-creation of an experience or event depicted. The poet and their poetry is not obligated or bound to realism: “The difference between art and the event is absolute” (42). A poem may remind readers of a specific event or experience, but it will not be this experience. At most, the poem is a reproduction of this experience, and, at least, merely influenced by an event. This statement leads towards a text as its own object apart from the author and the author’s intentions. Wimsatt and Beardsley say that “the poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s. (It is detached from the

author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about or control it)” (1376). Compared to Wimsatt and Beardsley, Eliot talks more about the critic and poet, but less about the public: “The evaluation of the work of art remains public; the work is measured against something outside the author” (1831). According to these measures, if a poem mentions or even evokes a specific place for a reader, she can claim or interpret place as an important part of the poem. Even though a poet may vocalize or otherwise claim their text and their intention for the text are the same thing, readers, especially critics, are under no obligation to consider a writer’s intention or their biography.

### **The Poetry of T.S. Eliot**

Eliot’s poetry regularly includes both urban and rural settings and a mixture of American and foreign landscapes. Deciding which places influenced his poetry, though, is a challenge, as he was born in St. Louis to a family with strong New England ties. His permanent move to England further complicates discussions of which region and culture influenced him. Both countries influenced his writing to varying degrees, though London played a stronger role in *The Wasteland*. The type of places Eliot used changed over time as some of his earlier poems like *Prufrock* describe a generic urban setting while his later poems like *The Dry Salvages* or *Four Quartets* mention specific places. Eliot considers the contrasting American landscapes of his childhood:

My urban imagery was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed. It was also, however, the Mississippi, as it passes between St. Louis and East St. Louis in Illinois; the Mississippi was the most powerful feature of Nature in that environment. My country landscape, on the other hand, is that of New England, of coastal New England, and New England from June to October. (422)

These places and the contrast they often create will become important in his poetry both indirectly and directly. John Serio traces the shift in his poetry from impersonal places to large, personal landscapes and how they match a change in his poetry as well. In “Eliot as a Product of America,” Sigg points out some of the American landscapes in Eliot’s poetry, including while living in Boston, he “visited North Cambridge, Dorchester, and Roxbury, giving their names to a series of short poems, some of which survive as parts of ‘Preludes’” (19). More natural American landscapes appear in his poetry too, “particularly the New England coastline’s fog, granite islands, birds, and pine woods. There he returned in memory to this summer sailing voyages, ‘between one June and another September,’ basing ‘Marina,’ for instance, on Casco Bay, Maine. St. Louis figures less prominently until Eliot joins his two boyhood locales in *The Dry Salvages*” (23).

In a late essay, “The Frontiers of Criticism,” Eliot mentions that “the best of my *literary* criticism ... is a by-product of my private poetry-work-shop; or a prolongation of the thinking that went into the formation of my own verse... [It] can be fully appreciated only when it is considered in relation to poetry I have written myself” (qtd. in Serio 35). Critics have treated “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as a manifesto not only for Eliot, but for Modernism and later movements, as well, including New Criticism and Language Poetry. Like most manifestos,

that early essay represents a moment in time; it doesn't describe the sum total of all of the poetry of T. S. Eliot.

Eliot himself considered place an important part of his poetry, although he often used it metaphorically. He says that his "poetry, like that of other poets, shows traces of every environment in which I have lived" (421). He calls Robert Frost a fellow New Englander whose poetry was "deeply affected by the New England landscape" (421). This connection may seem surprising, as Eliot is typically taught as a high Modernist whose work generally exists outside of time and place. This long held belief becomes problematic upon closer examination. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" describes an industrialized, polluted city early in the poem, as well as an interior and a beach. Both Serio and Reibetanz suggest that these landscapes are symbolic and metaphorical instead of literal, such as in *The Waste Land* where "Eliot uses landscape in a generic way to reinforce the theme of his poem" (Serio 41). The landscape in "Journey of the Magi" represents "the paradox of birth and death which the magi experience is also rendered in an image of landscape foreshadowing the inevitable crucifixion of Christ" with images like "three trees low on the sky" (41). For Eliot, place could be metaphorical.

Eliot's seminal poem may not initially seem like a poem that inhabits or evokes a specific place, but place is mentioned regularly. While living in London, Eliot struggled writing *The Waste Land*. Margaret Dickie claims that he initially attempted "to write a city poem in the tradition of urban satire and found it unwritable" (6). It still served as a starting point. In a similar way, *The Waste Land* gave other Modernist poets a push to likewise write a long poem and to make use of epic-sized concepts and themes.

Sometimes *The Waste Land* mentions a general place like “dead land” (line 2) or “earth” (line 6). Then the German lake Starnbergersee is mentioned (line 8), followed by Hofgarten (line 10), a location in Munich. These mentions of places that shift from general to specific help unify the poem as a primarily European poem, but also contribute to the poem’s fragmentary nature. Many locations come from Eliot’s own experiences. Eliot scholars Spenser Morrison and Lyndall Gordon have located many connections in *The Waste Land* to Eliot’s London and to his own biography. They reveal that despite his argument that poems should be stripped of personality, including where a poem was written, a poem may still contain connection to the time and place the poet inhabited. Morrison traces the way Eliot maps London:

the poem’s description of an anonymous crowd crossing London Bridge into the financial district ‘to where Saint Woolnoth kept the hours’ mimics Eliot’s own commute to his position at Lloyds Bank, located behind Saint Mary Woolnoth Church, on Lombard Street. Indeed, the London Streets mentioned in *The Wasteland* all emanate from Lombard Street, while locatable neighborhoods like Highbury, and Thames-side locals like Richmond and Kew, and the tube station of Mordant (the closest stop to Lloyds Bank) disclose a finely grained sense of place. (25)

These places, of course, are so defamiliarized for the reader that they become what Morrison calls “unreality” (borrowing from Eliot’s phrase for London “Unreal City” in the fourth stanza). They seem to stand for any urban space, contrasting with the desert and other wild spaces also mentioned in the poem (26). These connections demonstrate that even a poem considered one of the most exemplary poems of high Modernism is not completely immune from context and place.

## The Poetry of Ezra Pound

Pound's poetry may not seem to have a clear connection to many of the places he has inhabited, especially when contrasted with Eliot and other Modernists. Yet Peter Nicholls shows the role place plays in Pound's poetry by examining Pound's 1912 notebook and the manuscript for *Girandi*. Pound's travels on foot through this region afford him material to consider place, change, and history. Nicholls consider this period significant because "it is here, for the first time, that Pound moves beyond the mystical localities of his early verse to discover the traces of poetic energies in an actual landscape" (159). His notebooks reveal a struggle with past and present, but still strived to "going my way admist ruin and beauty it is hard to not fall into melancholy regarding that it is gone and this is not the emotion I care to cultivate for I think other poets have done so sufficiently" (160). His notebook also considers the effect of experiencing a place first hand: "you can not in any real sense *see* such places, you pass & you return, & you know like fate in the wearing that some time will come back for good there, for a that that is, for a liaison [sic.] for this is the ruin what it comes to, a saturation" (qtd. In Nicholls 162). "'Place,' then, for Pound is a particularly rich and absorbing concept" (162). This idea reappears in Ur-Canto 1:

Certain things happen & continue, they exist in us by a species of  
recurrence, they fall vividly into our days & nights after they  
are in one sense over & done with.

And there are other things, often 'more important' often more  
seemingly vital which pass into a sort of unreality & seem like  
a dream or fiction.

Nicholls claims that it is the seeing that makes something real: "This idea of 'unreality' and the related distrust of mere 'seeing' suggest that, for Pound, the genially visionary place can only become truly 'real' *after* it has been visited, after it has been absorbed into a mnemonic complex which includes other remembered places and perceptions" (162).

Nicholls connects Pound's "sensitivity" to place to Walter Benjamin's idea about aura:  
A strange weave of space and time the unique appearance or semblance of distance no matter how close the object may be. While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch of that throws its shadows on the observer until the moment or the hour becomes part of their appearance—that is what it means to breath the author of those mounts, that branch. (qtd. in Nicholls 163)

Nicholls sees Pound's notebook as an important transition from Romanticism to Modernism and other turn-of-the-century -isms as Pound rejects the expected Romantic response to the landscape's beauty. In a 1910 letter written while in Sirmione, Pound says, "Here I am more or less drowned in beauty, but it isn't the lake, or the hills, or even almost even the olive trees, but the four red leaves of a poppy that are the *poetry* simply because they go beyond themselves & *mean* Andalusia & the courtyard at Cordova" (163). This distinction is important because Pound "wants to distinguish between 'place' as something static, which might be felt to 'contain' and perhaps immobilize the mind" (163). In other words, place is much more complex than many of his poetic predecessors depicted in poems like "Tintern Abbey."

For Pound, visiting a place evokes nostalgia, perhaps even for other places: “Even in the notebooks of his walking, too, for example, when Pound is actually standing in the landscape of which he writes about, there is a strong pull to create what Siebarth calls ‘a kaleidoscopic montage of topographical features’ (qtd. in Nicholls 48), with allusions to ‘the Chinese background’ (48) and to the ‘Sky jap pink & grey’ (50) which predict the much later, daring view of ‘Mt Taishan’ from the detention camp at Pisa” (165).

Even though Pound’s two-line “In a Station at the Metro” is regarded as one the best Imagist poems and a radical step towards Modernism, it is also a poem of place as it juxtaposes nature imagery in an urban setting:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Originally a much longer poem based on a scene Pound saw in Paris, he tried to capture “the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself ... into a thing inward and subjective” (qtd. in Beach 26). While Pound may wish to capture that moment, it seems clear that the moment exists in a particular place.

## **From Modernists to Confessionals: New Criticism and the Fugitive Poets**

While New Criticism as a movement gained prominence towards the end of Modernism in the 1940’s, its timeline as critical movement is parallel to Modernism. It developed in the late 1920’s as Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929) was read and used by academics in the classroom. I. A. Richards, much like Eliot, shifted poetry analysis to an objective, almost

scientific approach. He “dismissed notions that poetry is feeling... and, argued instead, that a poem is an organization of meanings and as such can be rationally analyzed” (Perkins 77). He advocated for close-reading where he believed all meaning of a text originates (78). An even earlier influence is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Romantic poet and collaborator of Wordsworth, who was an early proponent of close reading. His criticism found a new popularity at the turn of century. Perkins notes how “newly attentive readers found Coleridge arguing criticism did not have to be either relative and impressionistic” (76). He also believed a poem could be judged on its own merits, not on some type of external measure. This idea seemed to fit well with high Modernist poetry that likewise sought to create self-referential texts, even though the term New Criticism itself didn’t exist until 1941. Other figures that link Modernism and New Criticism are the Fugitive poets.

The Fugitive or Agrarian poets are an important bridge from Modernism to Confessional poetry. The three main Fugitive poets—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren—to varying degrees were influenced by T. S. Eliot’s High Modernism, but were also influenced by their southern roots. It is through New Criticism and Fugitive Agrarian poets that I will show how Confessional poets represent the other extreme of self referential poetry.

These three Fugitive poets did not set out to become poets associated with the south in any distinct way, as Louis Rubin points out. Instead, through the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930, the south became a model for a rejection of what they viewed as the modern evils of consumerism, industrialization, and fragmentation that had overtaken religious and aesthetic values: “In the history of the South they perceived the image of a region that had for many years resisted the domination of the machine, persisting in its agricultural ways even after military

conquest” (157). Instead of emphasizing its perceived backwardness, they believed the region “was failing to cherish its own highly civilized values...[as the only part of the U.S.] that still retained the old American virtues, that still provided a style of living in which genuine religious and aesthetic experience were possible” (158). Rubin is quick to concede that the agrarians used the south more as a metaphor than as a real, factual account of the region. Certainly their romantic view of the south overlooks extreme poverty, racial division, and other concerns that make their judgment of the region problematic at best.

The Fugitive poets are important to poetry of place because they embraced high Modernism while still allowing place to influence their ideas about poetry. Fugitive poets wrote poetry in the same time span as many Modernists. John Ransom was the senior of the three poets. He taught at Vanderbilt from 1919-1959 where he met Warren and Tate as students in class. The Fugitives began as a group of faculty, students, and locals that would, through Ransom, come to be “a poetry club whose various members read and criticized one another’s work” (Wallace 478). The group published *The Fugitive* magazine from 1922-1925, and poems by Ransom, Tate, and Warren were regularly included (478). In the first issue’s preface by Ransom, he notes “*The Fugitive* flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South” (qtd. in Wallace 479). Wallace marks this as an early unifying step in Fugitive poetry as the group rejected “an overly gentle, sentimental southern literature and culture as the impulse for the group’s flight,” which, she asserts, “like other Modernists they fled an enervated literature tradition that came to a dead-end” (479). And while Modernism influenced these writers, the movement’s manifesto linked the group to an “anti-industrial, agrarian ideal” outside of most Modernist circles (478).

One important connection between these three poets is they were all southerners who were also in some way removed from the South. Ransom was born in Tennessee in 1888, Tate in Kentucky in 1899, and Warren was born in Kentucky in 1905. All spent time in and out of the South, even abroad. This distance and movement created distance from the South coupled with their strong familiarity of Modernist poetry. Tate, in particular, was an admirer of both Eliot and Pound. It was in New York City that he began his best known poem “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” and he would continue to live in an out of the South until retiring to Tennessee in 1968 after teaching at the University of Minnesota (Wallace 487). In his poetry, the modern southern man is disconnected from his past and its culture due to the span of time but “even the ability to define reality through it” (Rubin 172).

As the oldest of the three, Ransom is less disconnected from the past, but his poetry is also less directly southern. Warren described “Ransom’s southernness” as a “drama of ‘difference from’ and identification with” that Patricia Wallace believes “endorsed southern communal traditions. At the same time, he also set himself against a southern literary tradition whose overgenteelity was a form of escape from the world and against a romantic idealism equally deplorable” (480). This positioning lines up well with Levi-Strauss’s view that a writer of place is a kind of anthropologist of their own locale, able to write from a distance, yet not as a complete outsider or tourist (Alonso 4). It also aligns Ransom as thoroughly Modernist in his rejection of Romanticism and the Genteel. Wallace likewise sees “Tate as a southern writer exiled from the south even as he was connected to it” (487). Tate identified with Eliot, an American exiled to England, but he also identified with Edgar Allan Poe, a fellow southerner: “In Tate’s self-understanding as well as his vision of Poe, the larger meanings of exile and

connection extended both to a divided self and to a fragmented culture in which this self might be stranded without a connection” (Wallace 487). The South would become a way for Tate to ground himself and his work, especially when he spent so much of his life away. Warren, Rubin argues, is more concerned about man’s inalienable connection to nature (179). The pastoral is what men should return to as “modern man is out of place, and his estrangement from nature is a sign of it” (180). He believed that agrarianism “enabled, them as poets, to regulate their experience, to bring together in a controlling image some of the diverse insight and sense-data of their lives” (183).

In short, the south in its broadest sense became a place to work out both what they saw the rest of America lacked and where American ideals should return. While the Fugitive Agrarians did move poetry back towards place, it is difficult to claim their poetry as poetry of place in that literal place was not their main focus or interest, but instead the south became a metaphor or symbol for reclaiming a way of life they felt lost to the twentieth century.

### **Confessional poets**

In many ways, confessional poetry is the opposite pole from high Modernism and it’s this contrast I want to consider as I explain the role of place in Confessionalism. Confessional poets were so caught up with the poet or speaker, their emotions, state of mind, and thoughts, that little else mattered, including place or setting. Confessional poetry arose as a reaction against the new critical poetics of depersonalization, as well as the homogeneity of 1950’s culture. Creating a binary between high Modernism and Confessional poetry is too simple, however. Many confessional poets embraced new critical poetics early in their careers, and they also interpreted

T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," as well as some of Eliot's poems, in a way that elevated personal emotions, experiences, and otherwise taboo or mundane topics (Hoffman, Molesworth).

In the late 1950's high Modernism had reached an impasse. According to poet Allen Grossman, Modernist poets had "used up the idea of greatness" (qtd. in Middlebrook 634). In addition, though, new critical approaches had taken hold in academia. Critics, readers, and poets often assumed that poems were and must be "an ahistorical, self-enclosed system, an object made of language" (634). Confessional poetry is a reaction to this belief. As Hoffman explains, confessional poetry combines the personal mode typical of nineteenth-century poetry with "the elaborate masking techniques and objectifications of the twentieth" (688). They managed this combination of the self and object through "the veneer of self-absorption unprecedented even among the Romantics," which allows their poetry to transcend the self and make "notable inroads into myth and archetype, as well as social, political, and cultural historiography characteristic of high modernism" (688). Its ability to turn inward makes confessional poetry a continuation of premodernist poetry.

Confessional poetry, however, does have strong ties to Modernism. Hoffman and Robert Phillips connect the movement back to Modernist poet Delmore Schwartz, especially his essay "The Isolation of the Modern Poet." There, Schwartz claims that poetry's detachment from reality came at a price that signaled an eventual end to Modernist poetry aesthetics. He believed it a disservice to the poet to not be able to use his own experience: "In cultivating his own sensibility, the modern poet participated in a life which was removed from men.... Thus it became increasingly impossible for the poet to write about the lives of other men...the culture

and sensibility which made him a poet could not be employed” (217). In short, a Modernist poet will go to great lengths to avoid writing about his personal experience because it is not deemed appropriate. This sensibility is what makes him modern (218). This aesthetic choice also means that the poet is likely to write poetry about poetry rather than about himself. By refusing to write poetry about the self, the poet is forced to find “new and special uses of language.” Schwartz goes on to say that the poet is not able to use “the common language of daily life, its syntax, habitual sequences, and processes of association” because he wishes to write an impersonal poetry (218).

This disconnect from the everyday, both in language and subject, partially accounts for the impasses of Modernism in the 1950s. New Criticism also played a role. For New Criticism, a poem’s speaker is always a persona, never the actual poet or nearly the poet; even “the subject matter did not reveal or necessarily arise from the poet’s life” (Perkins 408). Confessional poets reacted against such stiff, impersonal poetry to “let basic human feelings and experiences back into American poetry” (Brendon 1090). This reversal signified a break with Modernism and new criticism as confessional poets recognized the poet’s private life as the most immediate subject available.

Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, others, began to write poems that broke from this new critical mode. Yet it was these same poets and many others who initially wrote poetry influenced by New Criticism, as Middlebrook notes. Others, like James Wright, share some confessional poetic tendencies but were instead grouped into later movements, such as Deep Imagery or Postconfessional. Many of these confessional poets also studied with leading New Critics, including Ransom, Warren, and Tate. Consequently, they

began their careers writing complex, formal poems based in the new critical mode. For example, Lowell's poetic reputation began with the publication of *Lord Weary's Castle* in 1946 when his poetry was very much immersed in New Criticism, though Perkins believes Lowell's poetic talents exceeded most New Critics, which accounts in part for his ability to radically shift styles (406). Poets Anne Sexton and John Berryman, themselves early influenced by New Criticism and Formalism, gradually shifted their poetry to write more directly about their lives and feelings. As Beach puts it, confessional "poems were presented in the first-person voice with little apparent distance between the speaker and the poet; they were highly emotional in tone, autobiographical in content, and narrative in structure" (155). Middlebrow adds that "Confessional poetry... participated in the protest against Impersonality as a poetic value by reinstating an insistently autobiographical first person engaged in resistance to the pressure to conform" (635). In short, confessional poetry returned the personal to poetry after New Criticism sought to remove or at least suppress it.

M. L Rosenthal's review of Lowell's *Life-Studies* first coined the term "confessional," and it marked a new possibility for poetry. Discussing Robert Lowell's shift between his 1951 book *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* and *Life Studies*, Phillips notes how "Lowell stated it was difficult for him to find a subject and language of his own. But by 1959 it was obvious he had found his subject—himself" (18). Self as subject to varying degrees is central to confessional poetry even when many other characteristics are not as shared between poets. John Berryman's main work are his *77 Dream Songs*, a poetic sequence of short sonnet-length persona poems heavily based on his own life. Robert Lowell points out some of its more confessional aspects:

The dreams are not real dreams but a waking hallucination in which anything that might have happened to the author can be used at random. Anything he has seen, overheard, or imagined can go in. The poems are about Berryman, or rather they are about a person he calls *Henry*. Henry is Berryman seen as himself, as *poète maudit*, child and puppet. He is tossed about with a mixture of tenderness and absurdity, pathos and hilarity that would have been impossible if the author had spoken in the first person. (108)

The freedom Berryman had to include anything from his life is a driving factor in his work. Confessional poetry did not solely originate with Robert Lowell or M. L. Rosenthal's review of *Life Studies*, however. Phillips considers Whitman as one example of a proto-confessionalist as he "taught courage to many moderns—the courage to write about what they are and what they have been" (4).

Another strong difference between confessional poetry and past poetic movements of the twentieth century is a renewed interest in realism, and it is here that place plays an important role. Realistic details were an important part of making a confessional poem authentic, which leads to an important point. While I am using Confessional poets as the antithesis of Modernism, it too was a construct of each poet with different aesthetics and goals. As James Merrill asserts, "Confessional poetry....is a literary convention like any other, the problem being to make it *sound* as if it were true" (qtd. in Perloff 4). Lowell puts it this way: "the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell" (qtd. in Perloff 4). In order to be convincing confessions, confessional poetry has to appear real. By its very nature, it is warranted that confessional poetry is autobiographical, and, thus, a poet like Lowell "cannot...tinker with the basic facts of his life: geographic locale, dates, the names and position of friends and families... the three months spent

in a mental hospital and so on” (Perloff 486). Rather than seeking to discredit confessional poetry, Perloff’s point is to remind that confessional poetry is still a crafted medium with choices and aesthetics. The craft of the poem and poet, unlike New Criticism, becomes secondary to the poem’s desire to confess something, often negative, about the inner life of the speaker. To be confessional poetry in the strictest sense of the word means to put the self, in particular emotions, experiences, and thoughts above all other possible topics.

If emotion, experiences, and thoughts are the focus of confessional poetry, setting or place becomes necessary but secondary. Certainly, Lowell could evoke setting in a poem, but setting often serves primarily to reveal the inner turmoil of a poem’s speaker. His poem “Skunk Hour,” for example, takes place in a coastal Maine town where Lowell “implicitly compares the landscape of ‘love-cars’ lying ‘hull to hull’ with his own mental state” through utterances like “my mind’s not right” and “I hear / my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell” (Beach 157). Place seems a trigger in many of Lowell’s poems in *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*. Paul Breslin believes “The sinister language of illness (‘the season’s ill’) and contamination (‘A red fox stain covers Blue Hill’) does not rest on a convincing portrayal of anything sinister in the environment; it is only intelligible as the projection of the poet’s internal sense of foreboding” (68).

Setting is still integral, however. For both the reader and author, it is difficult to separate the speaker from the environment, as the environment becomes either a foil or a catalyst for the speaker or the experience. “For the Union Dead” is similar to “Skunk Hour” in the way it depicts the speaker’s experience of a place. In this case, the immediate setting is Boston, but the poem also intersperses history through the bas relief mural commemorating the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts

regiment and their leader Colonel Shaw, and goes on to describe the speaker's personal history with the now shuttered South Boston Aquarium where "Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass." In addition, the speaker's mental state is not front and center in "For the Union Dead." Instead, the speaker is more a framing device than anything else. The only insights into the speaker's mental state are gleaned from his descriptions of places and events.

Confessional poetry brings with it an inflated ego, which is one of its main weaknesses. A poet, much like any writer, has an ego, some sense that their thoughts, feelings, or point of view is worthy of expression in verse. Alan Williamson points out that "personal poetry must, in the beginning, be extremely narcissistic if it is to be worth doing at all" (38). However, unlike most other kinds of poetry where a poet's ego or self will be restrained or minimized, confessional poetry is above all, ego-based poetry. Much like Molesworth suggests in his reading of Plath and Sexton, a poet is a god-like creator of his poem, though this power creates a crisis for the confessional poet, where "either the poet must become God or resign consciousness altogether" (167). This all-powerful poetic ego takes the poet and poem through many revelations that a regular person, may not consider worthy of poetry. Phillips insists that "a true confessional poet places few barriers, if any between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove" (8).

While confessional poetry is not poetry of place, per se, its very mode is wrapped up in setting. By privileging the personal, Confessionalism cannot be divorced from place. Because we must believe the confession as the true thoughts of the speaker/poet, the experience and thus confession is usually grounded in place. The place is there to ground the experience, but it is still an integral piece.

## Intention and Poetry of Place

One of the important questions surrounding the role of place is whether an author intended to write about a particular place or whether place emerged as part of the writing process. As Perkins notes in his history of American poetry, some poets in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century became regionalists unintentionally as they wrote in relative isolation and their natural surroundings became a part of their poetry (363). Other writers, however, deliberately chose to write about their region as their chosen subject matter as part of their aesthetics.

Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges considers intention and its role in writing about place in “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” arguing that intentional regionalism, the drive to include “local color,” leads to work with limited success at authentically evoking place. Instead, a writer should focus on the text and allow place to organically seep in. While he focuses on Argentina, his point has wider implications for what’s at stake when labeling a writer and their work regionalist as he considers the paradox of the intentional regional writer and unintentional regional writer. A writer’s intention to write about a specific locale is not a corrupting factor, but instead a natural part of the writing process, as is any other choice a writer may make, but to truly be a regionalist writer, a writer has to choose to write about a particular place. Consider New Englander Robert Frost who was born in California and lived there for most of his childhood. He began as an outsider to New Hampshire, further emphasized by living in England for a few years, where his first collection, *A Boy’s Will* was published. Frost is not an outsider

who doesn't know New England, the subject of his poetry, but he is also not a native New Englander. His position as neither outsider nor local may provide the best critical distance to write about the chosen place. Frost can be called a native in the way Sandra Beasley uses the term—someone who has a long-term, vested interest in the area (Beasley).

But then there is the Author's Intention, which is often bound up with labeling a work as regional or not. For Borges, intention plays an important role in determining if a text is authentically regionalist or merely a simulacrum of regional work. He uses the genre *gauchesque* poetry, poetry written in the style of *payadores* or *gauchos* to make his argument. In Argentina, Borges notes, many critics consider gauchesque poetry the most authentic genre of Argentine literature. Future Argentinian writers should model these poems to further the country's literature. These original texts, they insist, "should guide the contemporary writer and are a point of departure and perhaps an archetype" (177). One such canonical text, *Martín Fierro*, is held up as an example of gauchesque poetry (177-178). Despite critics like Ricardo Rojas who link the two, Borges maintains that payadores and gaucheseque are two different forms with different styles and intent: "The popular poets of the country and the suburbs compose their verses on general themes [such as] the pangs of love and loneliness... and do so in a vocabulary which is very general; on the other hand, the gauchesque poets cultivate a deliberately popular language never essayed by the popular poets themselves" (178). Borges makes this distinction to argue that "gauchesque poetry... is a literary genre as artificial as any other" (178). This style of poem is already an imperfect copy of a poem written by an actual gaucho or cowboy. He insists it is nearly impossible to confuse the two forms. Since gauchesque poets are themselves not payadores, Argentinian cowboy minstrels, their work may at times resemble gaucho poetry, but

will never be mistaken for it because their work lacks authenticity, a crucial component of regionalist work. This authenticity is part of the paradox Borges creates. Alonso explains this when he notes that “the very desire for an autochthonous expression became the guarantee that the desire will never be fulfilled, since the nature of the concept precludes the possibility of its ever becoming an object of desire” (3). As a concept, gauchesque poetry resembles gaucho poetry, but it will never fully be gaucho, hence the term gaucheseque. This intention to imitate sets gauchesque poets apart from their alleged inspiration, much like the poet from Kansas who sets out to write about New Mexico will be at a disadvantage compared to a native poet like Carrie Fountain who has lived there most of her life. *Payadores* have no need or intention to imitate anyone. The desire to create regionalist texts, for Borges, is always going to detract from anything else the text might bring or do. This paradox, though, would trap any deliberate regionalist, which makes his either/or argument problematic at best.

Another way to gauge intention is the amount of local details. Borges claims that Argentinian writers should not overburden their texts with needless details to make place or “local color” too central to their texts because this overabundance will make a text un-Argentinian and otherwise inferior. A visitor might exoticize certain details as a local detail while a local writer might down-play or even omit details. For example, in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbons notes the Koran makes no mention of camels. Borges accounts for this because its author, Mohammad, “as an Arab, has no reason to know that camels were especially Arabian” (181). Conversely a western visitor to the Middle East would include a “surfeit of camels, caravans of camels on every page” (181). This exaggeration of local color reveals a text as not authentically local and therefore less successful than a writer not trying to

emphasize place. For Borges, Mohammad “knew he could be an Arab without camels” (180). To avoid this overemphasis on exoticism, Borges believes “We Argentines can emulate Mohammed, can believe in the possibilities of being Argentine without abounding in local color” (181).

To demonstrate the difficulty of authenticity and intention, Borges mentions his own failed attempts as an early writer trying to capture “the flavor” of Buenos Aires, which resulted in work he considers inferior. It was only when he focused on elements other than place that the region then made an authentic appearance. His friends claimed that his story “Death and the Compass” had some essence of Buenos Aires, which both pleased and surprised him (181). Place seemed to seep in subconsciously, even naturally, when he wasn’t placing it in intentionally. William Carlos Williams believes that a writer will naturally include "facts" from the outside world in their texts, even if by accident (Siraganian 18). For Borges, then, an Argentinian writer should simply write without intending to write about Argentina. Intention or determination will in some way taint the text, a problem symbolized by too many local details. American poets, then, must not only choose the subject matter, but also how they will write about this subject.

Borges’s either/or statement that writers must not intend to write about place or else they will compose inferior poetry is not the only option. While it seems possible for Borges to unintentionally include Argentina in his work, he doesn’t seem to leave adequate room for other writers to write about a particular place, at least not directly. Alonso, however, explains that a writer of place is capable of writing about a place they are familiar with and will have an advantage over both an outsider and a local. This familiar native becomes a kind of anthropologist, studying his own culture while immersed in it (or not), able to obtain a critical

distance that allows writing to take place. Borges's example of the absence of camels in the Koran makes the text more authentically autochthonous than an intentionally autochthonous text (4). However, "the context of cultural exegesis in which they manifest themselves brings to mind the fundamental interpretative problematics of anthropology" (4). As Lévi-Strauss puts it, "in choosing a subject and an object radically distant from one another, anthropology runs a risk: that the knowledge obtained from the object does not attain its intrinsic properties but is limited to expressing the relative and always shifting position of the subject in relation to the object" (qtd. in Alonso 4). The writer, if they can create enough space between themselves and the locale they're writing about, becomes a kind of traveler to their region. The writer gives herself permission to write about location through intention: "The writer of an autochthonous text speaks from a position of physical and intellectual proximity to his own culture" (5). This writer is able to direct their attention and is not corrupted by intending to write about place. Instead, they use their personal history with a specific place as an important catalyst. Intention does not necessarily affect the outcome or finished product, as Borges suggests it always does. Both Mohammad and Borges had intention when writing their texts. These intentions simply did not emphasize place because both authors had different intentions that didn't prioritize place. In other words, intention is always present, but does not necessarily do more than merely cause the writer to create by providing a subject for the text. As Wimsatt and Bearsley argue, "A poem does not come into existence by accident" (1738). Distance and intention is part of my own poetry in that I often write about a place from both a physical and temporal distance that I reduce through revisiting a location or by conducting research.

As a kind of writer/anthropologist hybrid, a writer is able to not only write about a place, but their unique perspective as familiar native creates space for criticism of place, as well. Alonso accounts for Borges's own writing example when he insists a writer's "overwhelmingly and dizzyingly familiarity" with a specific place creates an anthropological situation that "cannot recognize itself as such being part of a culture or nationality does not equal total and unlimited comprehension of their culture" (5). Instead, "the enterprise is grounded on the sort of interpretative construct revealed by Borges's critique" (5). He argues "writing an autochthonous literary text is as much a critical endeavor as a literary one, or more exactly one where literature and criticism swiftly become inextricably entangled" (6). By writing about a place, the writer becomes a critic of this place while "self-reflection and distance are structurally built in" (6). Alonso also supports his use of the term "critical" in autochthonous writing since most of it stems out of "a response to a perceived crisis...a situation or event that threatens a loss of cultural organicity or integrity" (6). Further, he suggests that all work created within a culture is shaped and informed by this culture (6). Place, then is part of a cultural construct. A text could either signal a breaking point, real or perceived, perhaps even born out of crisis to become "itself the rhetorical representation of that crisis" (7).

Afforded by distance geographically and as an outsider, my own poems consider several places I have lived, especially the decline of specific places, individual and personal history, starting with southeastern Ohio, southern Louisiana, and Texas. I also see these poems as a way to represent and preserve these spaces.

## Using the Term “Place”

Now that we have explored the role of intention in writing about place and determined that it is possible to achieve critical distance as well as authenticity, we can move on to defining place and how it functions in poetry of place.

As Casey notes, origin is an important identifier when first meeting a stranger. For Americans, it comes a close second to “What do you do?” Yet, the question is often troubling, personal, and difficult:

“Where are you from?” we ask a stranger whom we have just met, not reflecting on how acutely probing such a mundane question can be and how deeply revealing the answers too often are. As the conversation proceeds, we rarely pause to consider how frequently people refer back to a certain place of origin as to an exemplar against which all subsequent places are implicitly to be measured: to their birthplace, their childhood home, or any other place that has had a significant influence on their lives. (Casey Xiv-xv).

In my own life, for example, I always tell people that I am from Ohio even though I have not lived in the Midwest for over ten years. Natives from Houston and Dallas, my adopted Texas homes, are somewhat difficult to find, yet I tell people I am from Ohio so that they do not confuse me with a native Texan.

This question of nativism raises a common problem: when is a person officially from a place? Is it a distinction the person themselves gets to make or is it put upon them by an outside definition? What is the arbitrary time when a person should say that are from a place? Is it when

they move there? When they live there after a year? Never? Casey notes how rare it is for anyone to stay in one place their entire life. Those that grow up in a larger city may have a better chance than someone growing up in a small city. Even if I wanted to move back to my hometown in Ohio, there is little opportunity there for myself or my family just like there is more opportunity in a large city like Houston or Dallas. In a real sense, I am displaced from my hometown. It is not the same jarring displacement as a refugee fleeing civil war or genocide, but my relocation for opportunity does come at a cost. Besides leaving family and friends, I also removed myself from a place I had known well enough to not get lost in and to even not think much about on a daily commute from home to school. This familiarity is what John Brinckerhoff Jackson calls “sense of place.” People who have a sense of place feel “a sense of being at home in a town or city, [which] grows as we become accustomed to it and learn to know its peculiarities” (151).

If place is difficult in our everyday lives, it is just as difficult in literary criticism. Part of the problem, as Tim Cresswell notes, is that because “place pops up everywhere.” Thus, it becomes “a problem that no one quite knows what they are talking about when they are talking about place” (6). He suggests this broad sense of its role in daily life makes it both familiar and foreign, “as we already think we know what it means, it is hard to get beyond that common-sense level in order to understand it in a more developed way” (6). One useful way critics define place is by contrasting it with related terms, namely space, location, and landscape.

Some critics have defined the term space in terms of an uncivilized, unoccupied location. It is, according to Yi-Fu Tuan, “that which allows movement” (qtd. in Cresswell 15). Further, “space is more abstract than place” (15). Cresswell gives the example of moving into an empty space, such as a college dorm room which is not different from any of the other nearby rooms.

Without exception, he traces how you would “make the space say something about you...thus space is turned into place. Your place” (7). He offers geographer John Agnew’s “three fundamental aspects of place as a ‘meaningful location’ 1 location, 2 locale, 3 sense of place” (qtd. in Cresswell 12).

Landscape is another term with a relationship to place. While it might seem equally suitable to poetry of place, and indeed it is used by at least one critic, Bonnie Costello, to nearly mean the same thing as place, most critics have understood landscape as something distinct from both place and space. Cresswell insists that landscape differs from place because “it is an intensely visual idea...the viewer is outside of it” meaning that a person can only look at landscape from afar, and unlike place, cannot occupy it, which contrasts it to place, because “places are very much things to be inside of” (17). Conversely, “we do not live in landscapes - we look at them” (18).

Place, by contrast, is both more personal and more meaningful. In other words, it describes “how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world” (19). For Cresswell, “place is a way of being-in-the-world” (19). Because place is about people in the world and about the meaning that we make of the world, it plays a powerful role in creative endeavors. Cresswell quotes a book of essays and poems of place in Great Britain that notes how “the importance of ‘place’ to creative possibility in life and art cannot be underestimated” (qtd. in Cresswell 2). Its creative power is often overlooked or underconsidered, however, because place is so common, so mundane. It is not until we lose our sense of place that we tend to consider its creative potential. Casey points this out: “If we are rarely securely in place and ever

seemingly out of place, it behooves us to understand what place is all about. This entails a sustained reflection on what it means to be in place—in the first place” (xvii).

If place is so meaningful and essential for the creative process, why do critics and authors not emphasize it like we emphasize other elements?

Just as there are several terms that capture similar meanings to the word place, there are also several possible terms for poetry about place: regionalism, local color, and landscape poetry, to name a few. In this study, I use the term poetry of place because it doesn't carry the historical weight of regionalism or local color. Bonnie Costello uses the term landscape to discuss poetry by arguing that the term is broader than how it has been typically used in reference to landscape painting. Nevertheless, the term landscape feels constrained to poems set in, near, or about natural settings, leaving out poetry set elsewhere, such as in urban landscapes. In the introduction to *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry*, Costello writes, “all we know is landscape, that second nature of human collaboration and invention. Nature as a place of origin and authenticity...dissolves in this entanglement” (8) and “Landscape even at its most abstract suggests an engagement with the material world” and “Landscape is the world under the gaze of man” (10). While certainly her rationale for using the term is convincing, it is still atypical to how the term is used by other critics.

Not only does the term poetry of place seem broader than landscape, it also doesn't imply any historical movement. In fact, as pointed out earlier in this study, poetry of place is ahistorical. In that way, it is ideal for tracing a particular kind of poetry that exists among or within other prominent movements such as Modernism.

## Why Poetry is Appropriate for Place

Compared to other genres, poetry might not initially seem a genre where place could take precedence. After all, place or setting is essential to most fiction. Consider the Western. While it doesn't have to take place solely in a wild environment, it needs to be in some kind of frontier, whether the American west of the nineteenth century in *A Fistful of Dollars* or the edges of explored space in the television series *Firefly*. Other genres, like noir, have to take place in an urban environment to emphasize the seedier side of city living. In this way, genre fiction often uses place to reinforce stereotypes. General fiction, meanwhile, can be set anywhere. In fiction, setting can be essential, such as the remote Spanish train station in Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants" or it could just be a nondescript setting.

But the same is true for poetry, as well. Alison Hawthorne Deming explains that "as a poet, I worship places" and in her essay "Poetry and the Power of Place" catalogues natural, man-made, and urban places she admires to offer how she categorizes these three different types of place (97). "Place is connectivity" Deming suggests, as

everything that occurred in a place—From the slippage of its tectonic underworld, to human and blood spilled on the ground, to the germination and degradation of plants, to the tunneling and cone building and fungus farming of ants, to the cafe lingering and banquet feasting and hunger on the streets—gives place its soul. (98)

Not only is poetry not constrained by place, but it may be ideally suited to exploring place.

In defining lyric poetry, critic Barbara Hardy considers lyric poetry's ability to exist apart from time. In other words, a poem is not contained by the passage of time: "The advantage of lyric poetry comes from its undiluted attention to feeling and feeling alone, and its articulateness

in clarifying that feeling, in attesting conviction or what may somewhat misleadingly be called sincerity; and transferring this from privacy to publicity" (2). Time is fluid in poetry, and a poem can take place in a fragment of a second or eons. Brian Boyd notes how poetry is aware of attention and its use of lines "can offer a space for assimilation, appreciation, reflection, and resonance" (18). By existing outside of time, poetry is able to reflect in a way that fiction may have trouble with.

Poets and poetry are especially qualified to consider place because of a poem's attention to detail. A poem need not provide a complete sense of place. A lyric poem is capable of capturing a moment in time like a photograph, but it is not bound by mere representation. There is complete flexibility in what a poet can include or exclude, including a freedom to zoom in or out as the poet deems necessary. Poetry is unique in its visual appeal. A poem has the ability to tie, connect, and focus in as much or as little detail as the poet wishes. There is no need to include a narrative unless the poet deems one relevant. If a poet deems it, she can write one poem, two poems, or even an entire sequence on one subject.

Poetry of place also provides a way for poets to push back against some perceived weaknesses in contemporary poetry. In establishing why they founded *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place*, Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell problematize contemporary culture and poetry: "The external world is becoming incidental. Self-centeredness and lack of attention allow the environment to slide into further degradation, even though we all depend upon it utterly. In its fullest sense, the term 'place' in poetry includes not only the geographical location and natural environment, but the history of human presence and before" (Siverly and McDowell 2). For Siverly and McDowell, poetry of place is a way to re-examine and call attention to our

surroundings as a kind of warning that our place is not as stable or static as it may initially seem. Further, without examining how place has come to be, we as humans risk feeling disconnected not only from our surroundings, but from each other. They argue place “includes the people living there now, and, as in all poetry, the voice of the speaker of the poem” (2).

Siverly and McDowell believe that poetry of place differs from most contemporary poetry because

A poetry of place is a poetry which values locales, which sees and lets the reader experience what makes a place unique among places. In some respects, poetry of place is the logical outcome of modernist poetics, with its emphasis on image and the thing itself. Poetry of place demands the authentic, not just for the foreground, but for the background, too—because context (what we see as background) often determines meaning (what we see in the foreground): A jar on a grocery shelf is different from a jar on a hill in Tennessee. (2)

Poetry of place is able to recover place in contemporary poetry by creating a deliberate refocusing for poet and readers who otherwise might not be as aware of their relationship with place. A reader may not be familiar with a specific place mentioned in a poem, but the poem itself may cause the reader to reflect on other places. The problem both editors see with contemporary poetry is an overemphasis on the abstract and non-place:

Much contemporary poetry focuses on psychological states, feelings, intellectual concepts, or language play totally devoid of reference to the real, lived, sensually experienced and infinitely varied physical world. Poetry of place may focus on such

interior subjects, but it lets us experience them more profoundly and more authentically because they're rooted in a specific time and place. (2)

This disconnect from the "physical world" comes at a cost of creating an overly cold, removed, even at times, impenetrable poetry that is difficult to understand and appreciate. Returning place to poetry doesn't mean a dumbing down of poetry, but simply creating a poetry that re-engages the real world in a real and recognizable way. In other words, Silverly and McDowell believe poets are looking inward for poetic material when they should, instead, look outward.

### **The Role of Place in Contemporary Poetry**

As a way of discussing poetry of place, I'm going to examine a few recent poems and poets. They are a small sample of contemporary poetry of place, but demonstrate some ways poets use place both as an inspirational device and as a way to consider their unique perspective on a region.

Carrie Fountain's "Burn Lake" recounts a lake's serendipitous creation in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The poem addresses its creators, the Burn construction company: "When you were building the I-10 bypass, / one of your dozers moving earth ... slipped its thick blade beneath the water table, slicing into the earth's wet palm." While the poem itself does not explicitly reveal the company's attempt to correct their error, readers learn "when nothing else worked, you called it / a lake and opened it to the public./ And we were the public." As the title poem for her first collection, "Burn Lake" reveals the relationship she has with New Mexico, as many poems in this collection come about by scraping the surface of Las Cruces and elsewhere.

Fountain's seemingly unpoetic topic choice demonstrates not just that a skilled poet should be able to write about nearly any subject, but that place is indeed a rich source of poems for the poet interested in writing them. In an online interview with Brian Brodeur, Fountain admits, "many of my poems are about my experience of the world." Fountain's poetry demonstrates how poetry of place can zoom in on a small place and both examine this place independently but also contemplate how it fits into a larger whole that can connect with other poems to provide overall impressions of a place such as the New Mexico landscape.

Jay Hopley's first collection, *Green Squall*, inhabits his native Florida both directly and indirectly. One direct poem, "Academic Discourse at Miami: Wallace Stevens and the Domestication of Light," challenges Wallace Stevens account of Florida:

I have no Beef with Wallace Stevens

Even if some of his poems do feel like so much tropical slumming

I only wish he could have lived here in Florida, instead of simply

Visiting once in a while

His poem's argument echoes Borges's critique of overly intentional poetry of place. Hopley's version is more authentic than Stevens's. Hopley knows, for example, that "there is a difference between the tropical light one find burning on the tropic." Without long term experience in the state, Stevens can't know "Florida's light is far more aggressive, far / More violent... / It gets inside your head and shreds / Things, dismantles memory, shorts out the will." In Hopley's poem, the speaker says that Florida light menaces "clanging, / Banging, rattling buildings burning / through the parks green pelt."

Stevens is a chief influence on Hopler, but he is able to prod at what he perceives is a small weakness in Stevens's Florida poem, especially in "Farewell to Florida." In this lesser known Stevens poem, the speaker laments leaving Florida through making a series of antithetical or ironic statements that make Florida much worse than his Northern home. The speaker claims "How content I shall be in the North to which I sail / And to feel sure and to forget the bleaching sand" and how he "hated [how] the vivid blooms / Curled over the shadowless hut."

That Hopler chose this poem and not a better known Florida poem such as "The Idea of Order at Key West" is intriguing. However, since "Academic Discourse at Miami" is more a commentary on the way the transient Stevens sees Florida and its light, it only seems reasonable that he would choose "Farewell to Florida," but Stevens's poem directly depicts what makes Florida, Florida instead of celebrating "the bleaching sand" and "the wilderness Of waving weeds," it does the opposite. Hopler is, of course, overlooking the more likely interpretation of "Farewell to Florida:" someone who clearly loves Florida is attempting to reconcile with the idea of never returning to the region, perhaps due to illness or advanced age and instead must sail home, even as terrible as it sounds in the fourth part: "My North is leafless and lies in a wintry slime / Both of men and clouds, a slime of men in crowds."

If Stevens or, by extension, his poem's speaker, had permanently relocated to Florida, then he could have experienced the real Florida to depict in his poetry. Conversely, "Academic Discourse at Miami" sets up Hopler as an expert in all things Florida including the terrible power of its climate. "Academic Discourse" depicts a poet of place as an expertise that comes from dwelling and not "tropical slumming." Hopler's Florida is significantly worse than the one depicted by Stevens and far away from the Florida depicted in any glossy tourist brochure photos

of sandy beaches and clear aquamarine water. A poem like “Academic Discourse at Miami” is able to hone in on and consider, if briefly, what sunlight in Florida is. It also points out how Stevens, obviously a skilled poet, is less successful at depicting an authentic or real Florida because he was an outsider. As Hopler puts it, he was “tropical slumming.”

Contemporary poets of place owe much to their immediate predecessors, in particular Richard Hugo and James Wright. Collections like *Death of the Kapousi Tavern* and *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir* coupled with *Triggering Town* ensure Hugo’s stature in poetry of place. Hugo is especially important because he described his process and approach to writing poetry of place. Hugo believed, “the place triggers the mind to create the place” (53). Michael Allen suggests how “a reader of Hugo’s poetry is impressed with how he uses regionalism in order to make not only a geography of names and regional associations, but also a geography of essential feelings, these feelings that hold human society together and make a sense of community” (50).

One of his better known poems, “Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg” starts by imagining how someone might end up in what seems like a contemporary Purgatory in a small town:

You might come here Sunday on a whim.  
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss  
you had was years ago. You walk these streets  
laid out by the insane, past hotels  
that didn’t last, bars that did, the tortured try  
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.

The poem’s use of the second person provides an uncomfortable intimacy as the speaker address the reader and asks them imagine themselves fleeing to Philipsburg where

The principal supporting business now  
is rage. Hatred of the various grays  
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,  
The Silver Bell repeal, the best liked girls  
who leave each year for Butte.

The locals' inability to save their town as it declines reveals itself in frustration. "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg" portrays the town's community through its history, residents, and buildings, framed around a second person figure who unlike most of the residents is able to leave since "the car that brought you here still runs" though the poem is unclear whether "you" leaves or stays. Hugo occasionally used the second person in other poems including "The Milltown Union Bar," "Driving Montana," and "Hot Springs." Beyond this, "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg" exemplifies Hugo's formidable ability as a poet of place in constructing and populating a town in decline within just a few stanzas.

Hugo's poetry came through purposeful trips to Pacific Northwest towns somewhat, but not completely, unfamiliar to him where he would spend a day observing. Hugo himself grew up in a small town called "White Center" and many of the towns he writes about are nearby. He describes his process in an interview with Michael Allen: "I was writing poems out of an area about which I knew very little, in fact, I used to imagine myself, or the speaker in the poem, along the river, and quite often, if I could start the poem there, along the river, I'd find I could write the poem" (266).

Hugo's poetry would seem regional if any particular label could be applied. Allen initially has little problem labeling Hugo's poetry as regional in its use of the Pacific Northwest.

However, he also acknowledges the term's pejorative use, calling it "a mistake" to limit Hugo's poetry when his poetry "turns regional and is thoroughly embossed with the rich imagery of the Northwest, it is less the natural landscape toward which the poem's emotional energy points towards the people —scattered, lonely, in conflict and often struggling to survive" (51). For Allen, it is in this sense of community that Hugo creates "a primitive map of that area between people in which human feelings create those slight, but essential bonds of community" (51). Allen provides an interesting contrast with Frederick Garber, who praises Hugo as a regionalist, "a celebrator of place who stares out at the Pacific Northwest" (58). Garber complicates this label when applied to Hugo, claiming "the region in which he is located is as much within him as without, and most often in both places at once" (58). He sets up a binary in Hugo's work that while his poetry examines a place, it is similarly a look inward as well.

Even though Allen is conflicted labeling Hugo a regionalist, Hugo himself says in an interview, "I am a regionalist and don't care for writers who are not, though of course there are several ways of defining region. I find it hard to write unless I have a sense of where the speaker is" (39). This need for orientation is not always a requirement of readers, but is one that poetry of place utilizes in evoking a specific place: "if we want to call Hugo a regional poet we have to extend the region he encompasses to include the mind as well" (58). Hugo is a regional poet, but one who makes the most of his region and uses place to discuss what he finds in a given location, but also to look deeply at himself in relation to that region. Hugo himself seems aware that regionalism is a complicated term with negative connotations: "When I say I'm a regionalist I'm being very exact and admit to those qualities in myself that depreciators of regionalism find objectionable, I am small minded, limited to the local, immediate minded" (39). Hugo takes what

should be liabilities and makes them assets to his poetry. This simple process of inhabiting a place proved fruitful for Hugo, and it's one he returned to regularly. Yet to say these poems are only about place is both a misconception and oversimplification. However, Hugo's poems owe much to his purposeful approach. Hugo describes his process as "a natural conservation built into a poet, that is to say, you have, for the duration of the poem, to accept the world exactly the way you find it, and the reason is that imagination, of course, wants to work off a stable base" (262).

In *The Triggering Town*, his collection of essays on writing, Hugo provides even more insight into his writing process. The essay "The Triggering Town" instructs poets to shift away from the triggering or inspiring subject to the words themselves (12). While he uses towns as an example, he uses this example so well that it is difficult to consider this chapter using any other subject. First, Hugo tells readers, "the poem is always in your hometown, but you have a better chance of finding it in another" (12). A poet's home town is too familiar, he goes on to write, because the poet knows the history and the various changes the town has undergone, and, most importantly, is likely to have a strong emotional attachment to the town. However, with the right town, "you can assume all knowns are stable, and you owe the details nothing emotionally" (12). Despite this strange newness, the town "must be a town you've lived in all your life. You must take emotional possession and so the town must be one that, for personal reasons I can't understand, you feel is your own" (12). Through this process, Hugo is suggesting that a certain distance from the town's history and facts, allows a poet to use their imagination to create a specific version of the town. The poet need not allow any "trivial concerns such as loyalty to truth...stand in the way of your introducing them as needed" (12). This town, then, is a launching point for the poet.

Hugo goes on to offer advice on how to develop this subject into a poem, but the subject of place takes on even more importance. Hugo says in one part that he “imagined a town, but an imagined town is at least as real as an actual town...Our triggering subjects, like our words, come from obsessions we must submit to whatever the cost” (13-14). A reader does not have to read too many of Hugo’s poems to understand that the process he mentions is based on his own writing process. Small towns are, indeed, Hugo’s obsession.

### **My Own Poetry of Place**

Now that I’ve discussed a few contemporary poets of place, I want to shift to my own poetry. This chapter will discuss the process behind a few key poems. The poems in this dissertation originated with the poem “Reading James Wright During a Louisiana Afternoon Thunderstorm, I Realize There are Worse Places to Live Than Zanesville, Ohio.” Written during a summer in southern Louisiana, it contrasts my childhood experience growing up in Zanesville through personal experience with local landmarks. Louisiana’s torpid, tropical summers involved long periods indoors pitted against a lifelong desire to spend summer break outdoors. Even several years living in southern Louisiana failed to involve acclimation. Instead, summer brought a version of Season Affective Disorder and depression elsewhere associated with Winter. As the poem’s title mentions, I was indeed reading James Wright, in this case his collected work and selected letters. While I had some affinity for Wright, primarily for growing up less than a hundred miles east of Zanesville, I had not read much of his poetry. Several classmates recommended his poetry, which began to pique my curiosity. This poem owes something to

many of his poems, including “At the Executed Murder’s Grave,” “In Response to the Rumor that the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia Has Been Condemned,” “A Poem Written Under an Archway in a Discontinued Railroad Station, Fargo, North Dakota,” and “Depressed by a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk toward an Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me.” In his poems, I saw Wright make a connection to his origins repeatedly through his poetic career and his ability to draw inspiration from other locales as well. In his introduction to Wright’s *Above the River: The Complete Poems*, Donald Hall summarizes Wright’s connection to Ohio: “If he reviled his Ohio, he understood that Ohio made him-and from Ohio remained his material” (xxvi).

Another factor in “Reading James Wright During a Louisiana Afternoon Thunderstorm, I Realize There are Worse Places to Live Than Zanesville, Ohio,” is living far enough away from home that I would visit infrequently combined with living in an area completely foreign. Feeling displaced in southern Louisiana, missing my hometown more than I admitted or realized. These feelings emerged in other poems including “Zanesville” that borrows its tone and repetition from Allen Ginsberg’s “America.” After drafting these two poems, I began to consider place as a new subject to explore. Over the next several years I would write more poems about Ohio, Louisiana, Texas, and several places I visited. As Richard Hugo says, considering his own use of place in his poetry: “An act of imagination is an act of self-acceptance” (Allen 283).

While I’ve been writing most of my poems over the span of several years, when I began focusing on the creative portion of my dissertation, I began to consider more sources for writing poetry. As the son of a high school American history teacher, I’ve been fascinated by history, but more specifically the narratives of specific people and times which made history interesting,

alive, and, occasionally, strange. My own life growing up in Zanesville has likewise created a personal history and experience with its landmarks. As I went home to visit my parents, I would also revisit parts of the city and surrounding area, some of which I had not visited for quite some time such as the Zane Grey/National Road Museum and further away, Marietta. My plan for writing more poems about southeastern Ohio consisted of revisiting several locations as a way of reacquainting myself with southeastern Ohio, in particular its history, but also its landscape. One specific site, The Zane Gray/ National Road Museum which is located east of Zanesville on US Route 40, was first an elementary field trip destination returned to later in middle school as an attempt to connect students to local and state history. However, unless a visitor has a fondness for dioramas, they will likely not consider the museum a place for frequent visits. Aside from acquiring a pottery collection in its central space as a way to attract pottery enthusiasts darting between antique stores, pottery outlets, and pottery festivals, the museum had changed little since my childhood visits. How does someone make a museum for something as mundane as a road that spans six states and over eight hundred miles? This museum is at least one attempt. Then, almost arbitrarily, the final third of the building is devoted to the early twentieth century western writer Zane Gray, including a recreation of his California writing studio, featured a writing mannequin with copies of his various Zane Gray novels and posters from Zane Gray movies adorning nearby walls. This museum's attempt at persevering and telling two different historical accounts represents a challenge for weaving history into a poem. A poet's interest or even obsession with a subject does not guarantee a reader's interest. Some events I thought would be interesting to write about, ultimately were not.

Taking Richard Hugo's advice to keep at least some distance from my triggering town, I

did not devote a great deal of time to reading historical accounts and would take notes for what caught my attention. I would usually not write a poem on location, but would use notes as a starting point for a poem. I did, though, spend an afternoon in the library of the Pioneer Historical Society of Muskingum County. The organization attempts to preserve artifacts and call attention to the historical sites in Zanesville and Muskingum country. They also end up with many donations of varying historical value. One interesting find was a hand drawn atlas of Zanesville created for a local insurance company to help them keep track of information about insured properties. My Father, who has volunteered with the society for several years in several different capacities, pointed out this book and the way each building and property was labeled with the kind of alarms and how many watchman, if any, were on each property. More fascinating to me was the way the book was updated. Paper was cut to shape and pasted over buildings and other changes. This atlas was a timeline of Zanesville during its decades of use, as the town grew, then contracted. Perhaps more of a mystery is where this book came from. Why did they keep it for so long? The answers are likely not as interesting as I'd like them to be, but this book is the kind of artifact waiting almost randomly for someone to discover and make (mis)use of. This book formed the basis for "Re-mapping Zanesville" as an attempt to think about the ways my hometown has changed over the years that are especially apparent when I return after being away for a year or longer.

In writing about southeastern Ohio, I considered what made it unique. I made use of both landmarks and landscape as rich sources, especially in poems like "The Big Muskie's Bucket," "Ohio," "When I read in the Zanesville Times Recorder that the Disfigured Statue of General Sherman from Baughman Park had been Sold at Auction," "At the Campus Martius Museum of

the Old Northwest in Marietta, I think About All the Other Parts of Ohio I've Neglected." During this process, I've also realized the challenges of selecting what to write about and how to write about it. The Big Muskie was an immense dragline bucket crane for strip mining coal in the region. The machine is interesting enough as an artifact of strip mining a process that adulterated so much of the landscape. That the only piece left of the Big Muskie is the bucket, while the rest sold for scrap, brought to mind dinosaur remains and also seemed to invoke, like Carrie Fountain's "Burn Lake" or Seamus Heaney's "Digging," this idea of poet or poetry as someone who is able to get beneath the obvious surface of a subject to what lies beneath. Remembering an unusual park campground I stayed at as a child, Baughman Park, full of historical statues carved by the original owner of the park, a self-taught sculptor, I started to do some casual research and learned the park had recently been closed, the land sold, and the statues sold at auction. One particular statue from the park of William Tecumseh Sherman had been vandalized long ago, its head removed. Someone bought the statue at auction, moved it to a shopping center in Western Ohio, not realizing how expensive it would be to hire someone to create a new head for Sherman. This formed the basis for the poem "When I read in the Zanesville Times Recorder that the Disfigured Statue of General Sherman from Baughman Park had been Sold at Auction" as I tried to weave my own history with this location with more recent news, I imagined how shoppers might react to this statue's arrival.

Poems like "Ohio" are an attempt to get to the Ohio-ness of the state. As part of the nebulous Midwest, it sometimes suffers in differentiating itself from other nearby states and from more unique states such as Louisiana or Texas. I can think, too, about the assortment of questions, stereotypes and myths, but I tried to focus on what I missed from four distinct seasons,

to familiar landscapes and landmarks. Many of these poems end up as odes to the region, influenced in part by Sandra Beasley's collection *I Was the Jukebox*, that features odes to atypical topics including sand, college life, Wednesday, and Los Angeles. Further, I wanted to provide some contrast to the many poems about loss, decay, and separation.

In the sections set in Louisiana and Texas, I sought to explore these areas, focusing on the immediate parts of both regions I lived. Compared to Ohio, Louisiana felt like another country with its humid, tropical wetlands, sharply segregated cities, the Cajun culture coupled with a cross-country move spawned feelings of not quite belonging in an insular culture that may be happy to make small talk with tourists, but is suspicious of anyone moving there on a long-term basis. Aside from undergraduates I taught and occasional conversations with strangers, I knew very few locals. Most of my close friends were themselves transplants from a range of other states. Like study abroad students from the same country, we banded together to explore our home for the next five years. This group helped articulate some of the strange, exotic appeal of Louisiana. Poems like "Rubbernecker," "Stalled on the Atchafalaya Basin Bridge outside Grosse Tete, Louisiana," "Crawlspace," "Louisiana September," and "Swimming in the Hotel Pool at a Quality Inn in Hot Springs, Arkansas, I think of my old apartment pool in Lafayette, Louisiana" recall some of the various moments and feelings I experienced living there.

Texas, too, has its own unique aura that even permeates many of its urban centers from decorating highway underpasses with Texas stars to a robotic cowboy that greets visitors at the state fair. Poems like "Denton," "Writing Poetry in Suburban Dallas," "Five Years in Texas," and "An Epithalamium Written in the Houston Hobby Airport Parking Lot," consider the experiences of locating in North Texas and then Houston, two distinct corners of an immense

state. I considered the nondescript qualities of Plano and the tedious but worthwhile drive to Denton. Even after logging thousands of miles criss-crossing this immense state, I know I have only begin to understand Texas as much as any non-native Texan can.

This collection of my poetry attempts to provide of sense of the diverse places I've lived and visited. The process itself has considered the challenges of representation, including how to represent a place I had just visited as well as a place I spent weeks, years, or decades. Sometimes, too I didn't consider a place until I moved on, which in "Removing Hurricane Debris," amounts to avoidance of the inevitable in not just removing myself from a place, but from a circle of familiar friends. Other poems like "Leaving Dallas" and "To Go to Houston" consider both an eagerness to leave coupled with a weariness of the familiar. These poems, compiled over several years and locations, make up a poetic map that poem-by-poem pins small pieces of myself to paper.

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**PART 2**  
**ZANESVILLE & WESTERN**

## **1. Ohio**

## Clay

Every May, home from college, I turn over  
a garden in my parents' backyard.

The loam and sand turns  
easy, but the red streaked clay  
I chop with a shovel,  
cuts like refrigerated butter.

This clay, remnants of ancient plant remains,  
prized for its malleability builds bricks, tile, pottery.

Removed from subterranean origin  
Clay molecules, thrown, pressed shaped  
by water, hands, molds, and sweat.

If cars, houses, loved ones were made from clay,  
would we be more careful or would we accept how little  
outlasts our inattention or ability to forget?

## Zanesville

Zanesville, the few who know you hate you.

Right now, someone drives Linden Avenue  
between the factories and bars, who glare  
across the street at each other.

Zanesville, I once hated you,  
for being so small, so far away  
from Cincinnati and Pittsburgh,  
the world, for thinking of yourself  
only, for creeping northward up Maple Avenue  
one mapleless parking lot at a time, away from a downtown  
full of churches, an empty brick business  
equipment store, its remaining inventory, a museum  
of typewriter spools and fountain pen nibs.

Sometimes, in the public library  
parking lot by the I-70 over  
pass where trucks and cars droned by,  
retirees and cheapskates scuffled  
over bagged up books  
for the best bag. Inside, one hundred Zane Greys  
corralled into a small bookshelf shrine. My last  
year in high school, I, shelved books

part-time there, amazed  
a Western writer could ride from here.  
Your one chain mall bookstore, I hated  
its size, small enough to fit a bedroom  
and its refusal to hire a single  
male employee, namely me. I hated  
the nearest used bookstore, connected  
to a used clothing store, full with mildewed  
romance, faded dress shirts.

Zanesville, I wish you'd make up your mind.  
You're a two river two  
more rusty bridges than sternwheelers.  
Southeast, you're just past the flatness  
glaciers granted Ohio. No one cares  
about living east, locals accentuate the south  
enough to justify stars and bars  
on mudflaps, romantic enough to name  
a nearby school mascot  
after lost confederate cavalry.  
Living the deep south's back-  
wardness, I know Ohio could never

be southern enough to secede.

I tell outsiders I'm from east central Ohio,  
use Columbus as the easy  
hub, Interstate 70 our state's Mason-Dixon line.

Far from you Zanesville, I wonder about you slipping  
away into obscurity, like weed-choked canal locks.

When I gaze at the yellowed photos of bridges, cars, horses, soldiers,  
parading through Putnam Avenue, I barely recognize you.

Your best days are the leather jackets I keep  
trying on at the local thrift store.

Zippers tarnished and without pulls, my arms  
overtake their sleeves and countless  
cigarette burns, convince me to leave  
them all where they lie  
on metal racks, all  
a history not quite mine.

## The Big Muskie's Bucket

rusts away Noble County. Incomplete dinosaur remains,  
enough to drive trucks into. Inching like a worm,  
its dragline terrorized Southern Ohio  
coal seams. Speed could bury its red and white body  
amidst earthmovers and dump trucks. What do you do  
with remainders, the leftovers? Ohio itself is a jagged  
piece of coal, drawn out of hills, lakes, rivers, and fields.

But *Beautiful Ohio* isn't about these  
reclaimed hills. Poetry strip mines words. How many  
words will I sift from this poem, leave  
crushed and buried for another  
poet to cover with grass and trees.

This poem, a bucket of its own, waits  
for adults and children alike to pose  
in front of its own worn jaws.

They will think there must be more  
to this poem than an immense bucket.

## Ohio

You are the cornerstone of cornfields, where the flat begins and ends. Flying over you for somewhere newer, more experienced seems easier in glassy airplane magazine ads and Facebook updates, but as any rusty bridge knows, permanence has its place on the Ohio river.

Your highways are the straightest highways east of the Mississippi until Route 33 slips past Lancaster on the way to Hocking Hills. You once stamped *the Heart of It All* on every license plate and once, you really were my all. Your four corners pull apart the streams of my childhood.

You are Amish from beard to the orange triangle that dangles on the back of every black buggy. You make a buckeye a weekend conversation. You are not the whitest state in the union, but outside of Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Dayton, and Toledo, close enough.

You are the crisp orange leaves of my childhood, glossy Mackintosh apple skins, flushed out barns that fumigate the air for miles like contrails from the jet overhead. A familiar pair of overalls. A wooden shovel handle worn smooth over cracks. A metal watering can.

You are a museum of better times if by *better* I mean canals, railroad, river barges, and if by times I mean since pioneers. If by pioneers I mean anyone who crossed your treed landscape first and decided to stay put, if only long enough to cut a path through Sassafras before Wal-Mart occupied every town of any size.

You're a constant moraine of change, new, old, and forgotten. Even if I were never to return to your snow plowed roads, I'd still feel the cool September nights on my neck and numb January days in, through fingers and toes.

**When I read in the Zanesville *Times Recorder* that the Disfigured Statue of General  
Sherman from Baughman Park had been Sold at Auction**

Months ago, a flatbed truck deposited  
the General, like a hitchhiker, pedestal and all next to a parking  
lot in Pickerington. An auction brought him  
here, headless, between cars and shopping  
carts. What more reverent places were his former  
stone neighbors, Grant and Washington, whisked  
away to? Shoppers noticed his arrival one Tuesday  
afternoon, but like a freshly paved  
parking lot, their attention has faded  
towards the remodeled Dairy Queen down  
a block.

We've moved beyond the permanence of statues,  
or have statues moved beyond  
us? Who cuts stones, now, when concrete molds  
goose and gnomes with ease? One has to look to the old  
to find much else. Baughman himself practiced on the sand  
stone hills in his rural Ohio family farm where locals drove  
to camp and visited his sculptures of famous Ohioans and Americans.

I spent a cold weekend there in a mixture of snow and frozen mud, a Boy Scout Iditarod, complete with heavy wood sled, no huskies or malamutes. Like a Jack London character, we built a fire fast, too. Unlike him, our parents drove us home Sunday afternoon. Now, the park's been sold, hills and all. The land more valuable than any experience on it. On the way out of Frazeyburg, I drive by on Blackrun Road and see freshly vacated hills.

I could though go to downtown Zanesville, a novelty in this town. The sculptor, Alan Cottrill, a reshaped businessman, opened a studio art gallery of his bronze sculptures. Zanesville is slowly filling with his figures, soldiers of wars long gone. Soon, he will move on to lawyers, gas station attendants, librarians, one for everyone departed, left the hills, crossed over the Muskingum and Licking Rivers, reluctant and eager. Some will never return, not even to see what happened to that kid

from chemistry class who joined the Marines.

## Re-mapping Zanesville

The Bloomer Candy Company on Route 40 vanished  
from Zanesville last year. We say we're used  
to it by now, but when a local company goes  
it feels like ice pellets on our wintered cheeks.

Down in Putnam, the part of town that crumbles  
like nowhere else, Harriet Beecher Stowe's brother  
once preached, the Muskingum Pioneer Historical Society holds on  
to history, books, photos, stuff people  
leave on their front step. My father shows me a giant  
atlas of the city. Hand drawn maps, used by a local  
insurance company to track  
each commercial property and building, factory,  
warehouse, houses, schools, churches. Fire alarms,  
police alarms, how many night watchman, anything  
used to calculate loss and risk.

Elsewhere, building size paper is cut, then affixed as new buildings,  
old buildings, gone buildings. Beautiful and archaic,  
this map book would need to be larger, to cover  
Zanesville today, but also emptier, to not show the red brick

auto parts factory on Linden next to Anchor-Hocking Glass Molds, waiting for demolition and a buyer. My old, second elementary school, empty, a place for Polk Scrap Iron to park trucks and junk hoppers.

A half empty mall was once the new mall, when I was just a short walk away.

A few years old, my parents would take me to watch its construction.

Earth movers, bulldozers, truck after truck hauling away dirt in exchange for bringing concrete, brick, lumber. I couldn't see downtown's crumbles, as department stores Sears and JC Penny's left to join this new construction, more buildings to cover up.

Mapping Zanesville is an unsealed road, cracks, breaks under ice, snow, sun, then weeds. Last summer, my GPS app, tried to get me to turn right on a non-existent part of my parent's dead end street. Developers hoped to add a few more lots, but changed their mind for reasons not on any map, hand drawn or digital. Already, the map in my head is covering up this imaginary block lost to pen and paper.

**At the Campus Martius Museum of the Old Northwest in Marietta,**

**I think About All the Other Parts of Ohio I've Neglected**

A city I waited thirty-seven years to revisit. My historic, infant  
self first visited when my parents wanted to get  
out of our house, a straight drive east from I-70  
to I-77 in Cambridge, stopping just  
before crossing the Ohio into West Virginia.

Old Ohio city, surrounded by forest and native Ohioans, large  
blocks still intact, I didn't know why  
I hadn't returned sooner. I spent my childhood pining  
to leave, yet scouted out state parks, historical sites,  
physical educations in their own way, unbound  
by books, classrooms, and classmates. With the rest  
of Troop 118, I marched across Blannherhasset Island  
poorly loaded backpack threatened, with its off-center tent,  
to sideline me like the loser of the Aaron Burr- Alexander Hamilton Duel.

Today, my father drove us to Marietta. We visit history together, one  
common interest. Though so much of the city is a museum to the Ohio river and the state itself,  
we opt for two museums today, but like most history it's dehydrated

to a sentence or paragraph. When would either of us come back to Marietta?

Inside the Old Northwest Territory museum, named after the original wood fort, Campus Martius, I don't know early Ohio, flat stereotypes

be damned, an Ohio of the imagination, this is the frontier, the west,

white man's place west of the Appalachian mountains. This building, antique

everything: expected muskets, swords, tableware, chains to measure

what a plaque outside claims in latin "he has planted one

better than one fallen," or at least that's what another plaque tells me.

A log cabin, Rufus Putnam's, the city's founder, encased in a brick greenhouse.

Meant to seem like the family has just stepped out for a quick trip to Wal-Mart.

Full of boat relics, only a steamboat

could love the Ohio River museum,

appreciate small differences

between paddle boat

sketches and photos of Queen City and Guiding Star

Landlocked, somewhere a boiler exploded. These dangers

seem quaint, distance, when a red tea kettle

and an unused iron are the two steam-powered items in my apartment.

Outside, a restored steam paddle towboat is the real museum on the river,

to climb narrow ladders, imagine noise and smoke, throwing  
food scraps that the paddles churn under brown water,  
it bobs a few times before sinking, lost to attention.

## **Maybe, Ohio**

Maybe you drove back to Ohio from Dallas one July during the summer your wife, four months pregnant, in Egypt to research her Art History dissertation and it made no sense for you to go, too, when you had no money and your own work to do, you went home for more than just to pass the long month she was gone, when you both tried to call between time zones and sleep.

Maybe you drove home for the way long distance driving drains the routine staying put creates, no looking past the edge of streets because they've been there, unchanged for as long as you can recall, which is a few weeks at best. Once, with your Father, you drove the opposite way, from Ohio to Louisiana in a Penske truck, a desperate move to stay in graduate school while moving away from other schools. An outsider move, without fallback.

Maybe you drove north to get away, even briefly, from the heat and hate your car's Ohio plates attract and at least behind closed doors and windshields its hate you reflect on a truck that cut you off on 45 South or the car bumper whose owner guided it back into your car, scraping silver paint from your car.

Maybe you drove to bring back the wood bassinet your Father made before you were born that your unborn daughter will begin in. A crib is one of many things you couldn't make yourself, no shop classes grace your high school transcript, but two summers ago you made a wood crate coffee table, stained dark coffee brown. Maybe you will take a car full of books from the attic to the used bookstore house on Linden Avenue, followed by setting out so many childhood toys for a garage

sale, not to make room for anything, but to purge your childhood, purge books you won't ever read or reread boxed up for years.

Maybe you needed to go home to drive the uneven roads of Muskingum county all over again, think about the Ohioness of southeastern Ohio, if there's such a thing and pull up past ideas, people, and events to turn into poetry, nothing like making sausage unless making sausage means throwing away most of the pig for a link or two at most.

Maybe you drove home to hear your Father question what you're looking for, anyway, in the Muskingum Country's Pioneering society archive, the National Road Museum, or the Riverboat Museum in Marietta. Of course you don't know. It could be a roundabout way to spend more time with your Father you see about once or twice a year at most, just enough to see how he has aged. Everyone has aged, you think, as you meet a high school classmate for lunch, one of a few you know anything about, out of choice, a way to try to reconnect your hometown with how you turned out and away, to come back as maybe someone who still thinks Ohio has something to hand you, even if it has to slip into your hands, pieces.

## Playground Supervisor at Cuddy Dixon Memorial Park

Like the park, everyone here is neglected.

Zanesville's decayed southern end, worn  
molars a toothbrush never reaches. School's out—  
like their parents: out of luck, out of work, out of sight,  
their kids trickle in to see  
what I found for them today. Others wait  
on the curb for the free  
lunch van, then go back home to tv.

Built on a dead end  
street, honoring a long forgotten  
officer, its back fenced by Chaps Run  
Creek, the park now honors  
the idea of a city park.

A concrete pipe, a one-swing set,  
a basketball court and a shelter.  
Each morning, I clean up beer  
cans, cigarettes, bring out  
the bag of playground equipment.

An uncommitted summer camp, under the shelter.  
Our weekly field trip: the pool at the Y,  
a movie at the dollar theater,  
even an actual park. My daily exercise—  
keep kids from killing one other. One kid's mom takes him  
off Ritalin for the summer. Annoyed, I hold  
his bike over the creek. A gang-like  
group of brothers come, close  
studies of tormenting and breaking.

Some just needed an ear, some a playmate,  
their parents and siblings, tired,  
bothered with bills and wear, adult games.  
One young boy, not quite grown into his ears, plays  
UNO endlessly with me. He tells me how much he loves  
action figures, but seemed to own two at most. It was hard  
not to think about no shortage of action figures from my  
own childhood, bagged and boxed in my attic at home  
that I would later sell on eBay. What did I know  
about not having?

## The Urban and the Urbane

I grew up outside a small Ohio city, one small enough that I distinguished it from a real city. When I thought of the word *urban*, only all that is bad, dark, and negative came to mind: endless traffic, crime, poverty, pollution. I probably really had in mind the word *ghetto* or some gray area between the two words. Once, at a friend's house over a bottle of wine with the word *urban* on the label, I questioned the word's appearance there, finding it silly, impossible even, to see how something from a field of grapes in California could connect to a city. Indignant at my reaction, and as someone that grew up in Chicago, he thought nothing wrong with the word urban, relating it to something trendy, edgy, hip (whether it seemed unnatural to me or not) as part of a restaurant name like Urban Taco or Urban Crust or the chain Urban Outfitters. Likewise, he couldn't understand why or even how a stretch of Interstate 59 in Southern Mississippi could have no streetlights as it passed through stretches of southern yellow pine trees. The world would be a bright place, I said if every square block was illuminated. His girlfriend at the time, herself a former New Yorker, likewise couldn't understand why a restaurant might close between lunch and dinner, stay closed on Sunday.

I could counter with *Staropraman*, "Star of Prague," that I used to buy at beer and wine stores in Ohio, but stopped drinking it after my Czech friend warned me that it was made with tap water. The way he enunciated tap water somehow equated it with raw sewage which also doesn't make great or even average beer.

But the pastoral is little better. The falling barn I could see from my parent's front steps just on the other side of a par three golf course. Close enough when cleaning day came it would fill the air with shit until it dissipated into the hills. Nothing urban here as my cell phone reception bars vanish from my screen.

## Learning Southeastern Ohio's Curves

Hills are Southeastern Ohio. In winter, they decide  
where water flows, when ice and snow will keep us away.  
My county school district closed when school buses couldn't  
make the hill to our high school that stood terraced, a learning fort  
between rolled hay, fences, cars. The school seemed so remote  
from my home aside from both occupying hills. How much county could it take up?

In Ohio's southeastern corner, untouched  
by glacier and little else, roads ribbon hills, turn sharp  
between farms. Between my house and county high school, a mile  
of US route 40, the only straight road. The rest, a tame roller coaster  
I learned to drive on. Near a Mennonite's mailbox adorned with *Prepare  
to meet thy maker*, my driver's ed instructor slammed the brakes.  
Later, out practicing with my father who utters *look out  
we're going to die* or whatever it took to slow me  
down as we turned off on Route 668 to cut  
up and over Muskingum County past Flint Ridge, where dead  
leaves covered clay streaked hills.

My subdivision house, built on the second worst  
lot on Kelly Circle across from a sled hill. The builders

stacked the house into the hill, its three story chimney  
leaned out until it had to come down, its bricks carried away  
before they went through a neighbor's roof.

Winters getting up our street and driveway, became a daredevil  
move, hesitate and wheels would slide and slip, into the ditch  
mailbox and all. We could at least take comfort  
to flood would touch our front porch as the rainwater  
flows into neighbor driveways and yards, they call my parents  
as if they created gravity or soil erosion.

## **James Wright Invites his Students at Hunter College to**

### **See What It's Like to Spend a Night in Zanesville, Ohio**

At night the streets become refuge to a brick warehouse converted to a Mexican Restaurant that specializes in blackened chicken. There, coffee is expensive and burnt.

Nearby a bronze soldier's broad rimmed helmet reflects yellow street lights, waits for the green "walk" to appear, free him from the concrete pedestal and pigeons.

Three blocks away in the Muskingum River, rotted timbers jut above the muddy water remind joggers something once coasted by pulled by mules. Afterward, they will have a post run iced coffee at the other end of town.

Across a green iron-girder bridge on Eighth Street burns the last diner. It will be replaced by a polished aluminum sided Denny's towed in two sections from Indiana, complete with neon clock, and black vinyl booth seats skin sticks to, the way black coffee stays under my tongue, long after I leave a bill or a few coins next to torn sugar packets on the speckled black counter top.

## **At the Zane Grey and National Road Museum**

A seventh-grade devotion to Ohio History, we rode a school bus to a museum built for boredom's preservation. The road in front of our school was the first road west of the Alleghenies. Zanesville wouldn't exist without it. We didn't care. Glass after glass display of dioramas of horses, men, wagons, frozen mid-labor over dirt, trees, water. We watched creation through each display, buildings that came with the road that models created out of plaster and plastic.

The museum cements time between the National Road and Zane Grey. One couldn't exist without the other. No West, no Grey without this road.

Outside the museum, bricks and sand show us how a road was made of bricks, sand, stone. Hand tools, no orange barrels, or sighing parents. We could see the hard if not boring work. We ate our lunches on the field that reminded me of our trip to Gettysburg, except no one died or if they had, no one told us.

I had no idea who Zane Grey was. Given up for Tom Clancy or Stephen King, Westerns were not read in the 1980s. We could surmise he was another dead white guy. Another local figure, alongside Ebenezer Zane, Increase Matthews, and Rufus Putnam, yet the only one anyone outside of Muskingum County might know. His life, a version of Hemingway in action, pursuing fishing, wilderness, and women. His writing took up westerns and fishing, but even my grandfather, born in North Dakota, a career Dodge mechanic, who had to work long before

finishing school, read *Riders of the Purple Sage*, one of his few books in his Northern Minnesota house. After his death, I carried it home to Zanesville, to see what fascinated my grandfather.

So many fictions about Grey- adopted, never traveled west. Others truer, married but wouldn't turn away many women that wanted to spend time with him. The museum recreates his California writing studio: animal skin rug, Navajo blanket, leather pillows. The author, waxed, hunched over a writing board, where he penciled his next adventure. A recreated fiction. Twentieth century Ohio seems so far from Western America. No black or white cowboy hats. Where could wilderness be wild?

My own writing space, much less exciting, first, an office converted to a nursery, then, a living room corner by drafty balcony French doors.

When we step through the school bus doors leaving for home, we'll forget most of what the brown brick building lets us leave with.

We only think of a road when it fails us when we're lost, single file construction, some accident slows us down to focus on every mile's difference when there is no difference we can see.

Modern engineering has tried to fight back the elements.

When I revisited the museum this summer, many years from eighth grade, it looked the same. No interest or money in changing the past. The eager attendant wanted me to visit John Glenn's

house in New Concord, too. Instead, I took Route 40 back to Zanesville, a place that slides slowly from time.

## A Crisping

Afternoons home from school,  
I collect the yellow delicious apples  
that roll down the hill,  
fight away yellow jackets,  
only to toss the fruit in a pile  
behind parched tomato vines.

Still branched apples,  
brown patches swirled yellow,  
will be cored, sliced, and bagged, frozen  
for a year of apple pies.

My tongue retreats with each slice,  
Ready to discard these apples  
for something better, something less sweet,  
something I can keep pressed between my teeth,  
like the smell of apple skin.

Bland but cleansing,  
like the smell of dried leaves,  
it will follow me inside,  
a relentless memory of a life spent swimming

through leaves, with no rake to be found.

## **Telling my Daughter about Southeastern Ohio**

Flattened by cornfields and straight highways, its southern  
half-molared with hills. The Protestant Work Ethic is on tap.

On Fairway Lane, I lived on a curve until I was five, our mailbox and yard targets for the  
carelessly drunk. Afternoons, we'd play in the densely pined park behind Kroger, a spinning gate  
the only fixture between a shelter and picnic tables.

The other direction, a housing authority apartments, whose swings we'd use sometimes, a K-  
Mart, then the only mall in town. My parents walked me out to watch its construction on  
farmlands. The earthmovers and bulldozers slow movement more real than anything I could  
build in my backyard sandbox.

Texas-born, I don't know yet if you will boast about its size, cities, or steer horns. Seeing how  
fast you crawl out your room's open door, I know you will want to get away, no matter what we  
do to convince you otherwise. I know too, that you'll come back, the way you wonder what  
keeps me touching my phone's screen or rustle the thin page of my class's textbook I skim  
before your nap. You can't help but grab or smack each, to know for sure they're still there.



## **2. Louisiana**

**Swimming in the hotel pool at a Quality Inn in Hot Springs, Arkansas,**

**I think of my old apartment pool in Lafayette, Louisiana**

Wandering downtown Hot Springs  
in July made me perspire  
like a cold beer bottle. Post dinner,  
enough sunlight to wade  
into the tiny, enclosed pool, hidden  
in the back, like a dumpster. Parked  
by overgrown brush, trees,  
metal storage sheds where  
stray cats hide.

On the way out of my room  
I pour beer into a water bottle.

When I lived in Louisiana, drinking occurred  
everywhere,  
I always knew how and when  
to sneak into apartment  
pools when late night swimming struck  
after a one bedroom  
apartment started to feel its size.

I forgot heat's humidity I squirm  
against for months.

Down south, central air and swimming  
pools, a natural pair, one to suck sweat  
off your brow, the other to wet  
your sorrow.

My own apartment complex, large enough  
for multiple pools, laundromats, and anonymity,  
separated by a mildewed concrete parking lot, space  
bar-shaped speed bumps to drag  
out residents and employees  
who couldn't leave fast enough,  
I chose the pool nearest to my apartment.

Over semesters, people would change  
move on. I over stayed  
like a lost cause, in this land of rotting,  
crumbling, resolve. My last night  
swimming, alone in my apartment  
pool, a six pack sprawled on a lawn

chair, mid-drink an off-duty cop  
arrived to shut the pool, a pool that never  
closed before. More unexpected,  
this cop, working for extra beer  
money to chastise me for drinking  
in the pool. This moment quit me  
from Louisiana.

But this poem is not about that night,  
in an apartment with meth labs,  
lonely, chatty people, or sidewalks that submerge  
in thunderstorms. It's about the gathering  
of chlorinated water, encased in concrete, a place  
to sit around and drink,  
think about the season when sweat  
wasn't given to skin like the sun's hot stare.

## **Rubbernecker**

I walk the two blocks each way, past a strange neighborhood of mobile homes, shotgun houses, a plain sheet metal Freemason's hall, and an apartment complex with tall, welded gates not unlike a gothic mansion or post-apocalyptic movie prop.

More interesting is a ruined, overgrown house behind a row of weeds and trees. Every time I go by on the narrow path between the road and giant drainage ditch, I'm tempted to push through the weeds and look. It has a modest chain link gate and sometimes, a truck is parked in front, though the entire lot looks suspended in time. The house's windows are left open and I've seen raccoons inside, up on their haunches, as if they're the tenants. Near the house sits a wood frame for another house or even an addition.

It's not unusual to see trash by the roads. A public service announcement on the radio tells listeners to not dump used motor oil into the sewer drains and to not use it to kill weeds since the frequent rains wash it all into the local aquifer. I can't relate to this temptation to pour its slow self out like emptying a Coke bottle. Cutting through a gap in my apartment complex's weathered fence behind a quick oil change station, I cross a drainage ditch where water has a neon green antifreeze color.

One morning, I smell and walk by a squashed possum. I take the usual tactics, hold my breath and walk quickly, but the smell lingers for a week, takes on the qualities of aged swiss cheese before merging with the blacktop.

## **Stalled on the Atchafalaya Basin Bridge outside Grosse Tete, Louisiana**

again. Forty miles of beg  
the question: when  
is a bridge not  
one, but a concrete island  
or some kind of unmoving ferry  
surrounded by water, an elevated highway  
across wetlands, the environmentally  
friendly term for swamp.

Like an airport, these twin lines,  
nearly a place, are the only straight way  
to get to Lafayette or Baton Rouge  
across the Atchafalaya  
Basin, 931 square miles drying  
up human intervention.

I crossed it, for years, frequently  
looking over, between black  
barriers, mildewing concrete  
like the rest of Louisiana  
highways. I'd been stuck  
on it before, waiting for an accident

or a Gulf Coast Depression  
to clear, the only time I could study the train  
track remains, Live Oaks, birds,  
phone poles, and water. At night, the bridge, an empty  
runway, a police car waits for anyone  
who tries to let loose, to see if they could land  
somewhere else, like the way an egret  
lands on a tree outside my car's dusty window.

## Crawlspace

I view nature through glass—

a tedious nature documentary.

Outside a library window pane, St. Augustine sod

resembles carpet samples. Round mounds

on a flat field invoke golf course bunkers

instead of a landscaper embellishing flood plains.

On my apartment porch, carpenter bees and hornets circle

for air and crawlspace. Dead tropical houseplants linger,

killed by a rare Louisiana hard freeze.

I drive forty miles to hike five.

I would be happy to stay at home, without neighbors

exhausted by basic cable, to open their blinds and stare.

In the country, I could open my windows whenever no one

is out smoking and talking all night

on nearby concrete porches.

Even if I am the only person

on a given trail in a given park, I am far

from alone. I'm used to waving bugs off my face and neck.

I catch spider webs in the sunlight before they catch my face.

Sometimes I never figure out just what jumped  
through the brush or flew away in a brown blur. Then I hear  
croaking and squeaking sounds beneath waving  
tree branches. I could see a ribbon snake's mouth latch  
around a toad's torso. I carry that scene back with me  
into my car's dusty interior  
like the mud on my boots.

## Shooting Lafayette

All the times I hated Lafayette after my car with Ohio plates was vandalized countless times that I started to feel were concrete signs for *You don't belong here, boy. Why'd you move down here?* Wet sweat, stick-to-your back summer that could only be tolerated with beer, swimming, and sitting in air conditioning. Sometimes I did imagine throwing a brick or Norton Anthology through the English department's window, but the rotting building had little to do with it, other than being a place I spent weekdays and weekends. I never imagined anyone's demise.

The movie theater was a way to forget we were in Lafayette, forget that we moved here, from somewhere where people knew us and maybe even liked us and give us something to talk about that wasn't school. We'd run across Johnston Street traffic to eat at Judice Inn's short menu of Burgers, bagged chips, and a beer.

Everything is thrown up when so many of us in and out of Lafayette hear this otherwise unremarkable theater will be remembered for real death and suffering, not something on the screen. We feel like somehow we missed death even years away from the sticky floors and dark rooms. We feel guilty for laughing too loud at Borat or pouring too much Jim Beam in a giant Coke cup. Even watching the worst movie on a giant screen should end in disappointment and sarcastic commentary. I would say we were lucky, but luck has everything and nothing to do with violence, the kind that tears out our hearts every time.

## Reading James Wright During a Louisiana Afternoon Thunderstorm,

### I Realize There are Worse Places to Live Than Zanesville, Ohio

On the Gulf, thunderstorms rumble. I sit by the porch window, watch water race off a gutterless roof. A small pond will pool below between cypress tree roots, well up over sidewalks. This is nothing like the Ohio River's clay waters that carry coal barges between tree branches. It's rainwater drainage and a place for bridges to cross. I'm wrong to stay here among suspicious Cajuns who wonder how I ended up here, something I wonder too.

Citywide, concrete canals flush rain runoff into the Vermillion, but in Zanesville, a Y-bridge crosses the Muskingum and the Licking, lets motorists decide which part of Zanesville to avoid—closed auto parts factories or creeks scattered with broken tile.

Down here, rusty bridge truss after bridge truss rise above sea level for shrimpers, back down for flatbed trucks full of oil drilling pipes, oil rig platform parts, and sugar cane stalks. The one semester I taught at a Catholic high school, a sign on LA 193 near Abbeville reads *Teens say no to sex and yes to a future.*

As a teenager, I drove past sagging barns and plowed corn fields, even further out of town than my parents' subdivision house, went off blazed trails at Black Hand Gorge, past overgrown canal locks, towards a tunnel that traveled through a hill by long gone track. When could I ever take a train to Columbus?

Before internal combustion and interstates, water was the swiftest way out. It was easy to ride it down to New Orleans on the Mississippi. Even Lincoln tried it. Now, rivers seem like just something else to notice through dusty car windows as a memorial bridge forgets who it was ever named for.

**I Ask the Paintings in My Room at the Comfort Inn of Lafayette, Louisiana,**

**What They Know About Acadiana**

Silent, frozen mid-chase, I doubt the white,  
brown, and black hounds are chasing crawfish,  
or even a landlocked alligator. And the hunters  
themselves, in red jackets, black, round hats?  
Wouldn't everything be better with an accordion  
and a fiddle? French flung down like it flies  
from my radio. The gators would take both  
the foxes and hunters on, no regard for British  
tradition, just a strong need to chase foxes through brush.

*If these trees could talk*, says the weathered man  
in a gazebo near a four hundred-year-old cypress,  
its limbs twisted to block words. Until then, look to the shredded,  
bagged cypress. Bear hug each, drop it into your trunk.

The air conditioner and dehumidifier raise similar questions.

Avoid heat, avoid humidity. Remove the swamp,  
along with the Indians who couldn't say river.

They would smirk at these rattling boxes.

Leave the air as you found it, like the trees  
outside, full.

## Louisiana September

Traveling back to Ohio in October makes a strange contrast to Louisiana weather. It's mostly humid in September where my shirt sticks to my skin after minutes outside. Even night steams. What a contrast to cool weather, never needing a light jacket, fall leaves changing and apples ready to pick.

The summer months are to stay inside, admire from afar as I sip cold coffee, tea, and beer. Like an alligator, move only when hunger and danger prod. Outside, people and their drinks sweat, stick to dry clothes and napkins.

My clothes pile mildew, every journey outside brings moisture. Yes, there are wetlands, the rain soaks up ground every Friday afternoon as I dodge pickup trucks in this Sportsman's paradise. When I look at a pile of Boudin, large gulf shrimp curled in ice, an aisle of pepper sauce and boil dust, I think Louisiana's license plate should, instead of a sportsman's paradise, say *an Eater's paradise, smorgasbord, cornucopia, or we eat and drink to forget coastal erosion.*

Some day I will adjust to this heat and sweat, only when it's truly hot, when roads steam and locals carry towels, will I sweat, not just when I walk the concrete from parking lot to building. Already seventy degrees feels cold.

## The Ceiling

cracks return to expand every winter. I know it's a joint between drywall pieces, that the apartment building is settling into the drained swamp land. But these cracks are fault lines of my life. If I were a geologist (like my parents thought I should become), I could predict the next release of pressure. White specks will drop in a cloud of gypsum dust and fiberglass debris.

Later, my friends and neighbors will be unable to feign surprise. *He was a poor fit so near eroding coastline and sticky summers. Sometimes as we smoked, we saw him reading on his porch.*

From the distance of my carpet floor, the off-white speckled plaster looks like a lunar surface, devoid of topographic variation, save for pockets of trapped dust, and one round gray circle where the roof once leaked. I thought living on the second floor would save me from rainfall, floods, hurricanes and it has so far, but this crack could be the beginning or end of so many things besides drywall.

## Removing Hurricane Debris

When last August hurled  
the first hurricane of the season our way, I laughed  
at your use of packing tape to secure  
glass windows in your rented house,  
Its only ability to not peel off glass.

It's what the locals did to prepare  
for a hurricane. Fill their gas tank, run  
to the store for beer, ice, Zapp's potato chips, anything  
they could grill. Outsiders, we compare it to tailgating.

I'm unsure what you were protecting- a bathroom  
door whose antique knob turned then broke, stubby  
florescent lights, rental offwhite shag  
carpet that absorbed Natural Light. A bike, used  
to ride to campus once in a harrowing, near  
injury over profound experience. A backyard  
no mower ever tamed.

I try not to think of my  
apartment down the street- putting off

packing, emptying, until the last  
minute all of it, plates, a freezer  
full of chicken, popsicles, Jim Beam.  
A packing feels like a retreat, an army  
of me pushed too far south, Louisianan  
Gulf Coast ate away at my shoes and car.  
The only thing left was to head west to Texas,  
leave the mildewed concrete behind.

As I slowly make my way  
up your house's windowpanes, each swath  
of tape, glue, and gel, removes traces of your  
short time here, but like my thumb, indented  
where it extended the scraper's blade, each future  
resident will notice small traces that can't be scraped away.

### **3. Other Places**

## Waiting for That Day That Repeats

Weeks when I'm repeating myself or at least parts of myself, it's hard not to think about the movie *Ground Hog Day*'s aptly named weatherman, Phil, to make an existential crisis funny. Day by day by day, not days of *déjà vu*, only his past failures remain: baths with toasters, drops from rooftops, ramming trains with drunks, and ramping a truck into a quarry with Punxsutawney Phil. It takes the movie minutes, but weatherman Phil repetitious months to figure out his power to repeat, to reform into a Renaissance man, a humanist even. Is he being punished for unfulfilled boredom as a local television weatherman? Or is there no reason for his fate to know the exact actions of every single resident of Punxsutawney at any given moment in a single day? But why Ground Hog day, the most unassuming and fabricated of all fabricated holidays? Why not a more expected and overdone by holiday specials holiday, like Christmas? Then, Phil—the weatherman, not the groundhog— could not help but repeat himself, but this movie is not about a repeating of self, but instead a deliberate unrepeating transformation that eclipses past choices with the worst possible kind of time travel through an alarm clock's tinned delivery of Sonny and Cher to snowy Pennsylvania.

## **Wheels, Together**

*August*

Our last day in Florida with your family in a beach house, on an afternoon whim, we rent a pair of cruisers to pedal down the coast to see new beaches. In the humidity we stick to bike seats and mosquitoes start to find us on the path by shining water and Cypresses. It feels freeing rolling down the road together to the next town under our own power. A few hours in Seaside, sharing yogurt, coffee at a record store, shrimp by the beach, and we turn around for home, the setting sun darkens the road until I can only see a hint of you, your yellow bike and even then the path fades to nothing, leaving us, our bikes, and a whole coast of bugs to walk home together.

*November*

I'd spent most of my life avoiding ATVs or what we called four wheelers, just like I avoided skipping high school to go hunt deer, but here in Costa Rica on the Nicoya Peninsula, roads are variations on dirt and gravel with brief moments of pavement in towns Montezuma and Cobano. They were also the only landscape outside of beaches that weren't green. The way any bus, truck, car, or van had to battle them meant slow, expensive taxi rides. After a few days on foot in Santa Teresa and Mal Pais, down to the beaches and up the hill to the rope hammocks stretched across our bungalow balcony, we're ready to go out on our own and rent an ATV for the day with hesitation. After a parking lot lesson on how to start its engine and shifting gears, we slip on helmets, strap down our gear. The first road is the road we walk down every day, flat with a slight hill and curve, dust, the only hazard. Map-that-is-barely-a-map in hand, we turn off a path to what everyone here calls a secret beach, but it doesn't seem a secret when every surfer turned waiter mentions it. You wrap your arms around me tightly, worried that you might fall off this path of

rocks and stream if I accelerate too fast or if we hit a bump too hard. The path ends outside a national park we hike to get to the beach, surrounded by rocks and trees, we promise to come back another day.

Together on this Honda ATV, up and down the back of the back roads, we are together, inhaling and exhaling, our hearts beating every dip and bump in the mud to dirt to gravel road hits us together through every hill and valley humid or dry, roads we've never crossed.

### *March*

For year after year my cobalt blue mountain bike has been a porch ornament pedaling dust and leaves. I finally spend enough to get it tuned up and we take our bikes to Austin. A great use of Spring Break, to pack up everything and ride south from Dallas and its lack of music festivals. We follow your friends down Congress Street's slopes to the bridge across the Colorado River. My bike, still not where it should be, coasts but the chain hangs limp when I pedal. When the hill levels off, I hop off my bike, annoyed that the bike shop missed something. You circle back on your cruiser, wondering what happened. My bike wheel won't engage any gear so I get off and walk it, annoyed the bike shop missed something so critical, but it doesn't matter since both us aren't the cyclists that your friends are who ride around Austin's hills regularly, a town where roads can't keep up with residents and now the herd of SXSW travelers.

## **The Kansas City Airport**

The Kansas City Airport is the belt  
buckle below the city's bulging gut.

A concrete half moon, TSA severs  
coffee and food from passengers,  
who sit between glass  
in a space foreshadowing coach class.

## The Airplane Desert in Roswell, New Mexico

*Deserted*, a cold word, like a desert

at night, located somewhere

between abandoned and junked.

As I land for the first time

in the city's small airport on a large,

retired airbase runway, I notice commercial

airline jets parked in rows, assorted

insignias on tails, engines removed,

clipped like a parakeet's wings.

Together they stare blankly into the flat

New Mexico landscape, itself a natural

runway. They watch the small, infrequent planes

yo-yo between Roswell and Dallas. Their wheels squeak

each time they kiss the cracked tarmac.

## A Week in Louisville, Kentucky

Friday night in Louisville and I sit at the desk in my hotel room. A week alone in a high-rise hotel room, the loneliest and loveliest experience of adulthood. Alone because my random roommate decided not to drive down from Chicago. The first few nights I half expected him to stumble in late. Then slowly I test my freedom, watch *Game of Thrones* with Spanish subtitles, sleep naked with the shades open. Stare down at the park below, hear the steam pipe organ aboard the *Belle of Louisville* play cane sugar syrupy melodies that penetrate even the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor. Only housekeeping would notice if I never left the room, but my phone's alarm sounds every day at 5:30 am, a lonely summons to leave.

The desk light makes the bottom shelf bourbon glow amber. A consolation prize for not having the time to go through a distillery tour, but time to run through a CVS after a long day of scoring essays. Through my wide window, downtown Louisville stands, a park full of white plastic tents, a bend in the Ohio River. This is the best part of my week here, not the room flooded with English high school and college teachers sitting amidst an endless stream of pink booklets filled with all manner of handwriting in a race between penmanship and readership, the latter vessel slow and the former fast and aimless. Our brains become machines in their ability to skim, reading enough to tag a number to every essay, sometimes jarred by beautiful or writing that leaves my head as soon as I leave my grading table. The student's penciled letters, flow away like the Ohio River's mud rich waters to somewhere hotter and darker.

## Kansas City Convention Center

The battered radiator pulls  
away from window sills hit  
too often by forklifts and pallet jacks, slow  
destruction by someone in a hurry  
to not give a fuck. Through the window, If I squint,  
I can see tiny construction workers refinishing  
the Light and Power Building. Its stained  
glass art deco windows, something to look  
at wandering and wondering for something  
to do in a city that feels uninhabited after 5.

This concrete rectangle we sit inside squats  
on interstate 35, a no man's land for any city,  
its torch-like poles give us something to look at,  
as we huff towards it past churches and a taxidermy store.

Down the hill towards Union Station, Western Auto flashes  
its red arrow on a curved building and roads disassembled  
for an incoming trolley system, once removed  
in favor of cars and buses, now back  
for novelty or nostalgia. For us, we step between

orange cones and wood planked concrete molds.

My roommate this week, a friend from my master's degree days, flew back from teaching English and learning Chinese in China, to pick up his life's fragments. Even in graduate school, we never spent so much time together. We roam the quiet streets, pause through art galleries to see if we can afford the free wine or quarters for Up Down the video game bar. Even the hotel bar starts to become an interesting place to drink off barbeque. A week of this is about all we can handle and a sense that elsewhere, where the city's residents live far beyond our dirty footprints.

## Coffee Siren

Every child knows  
mermaids don't drink coffee  
but they can sell it  
on the expressway.

Will they leave room for cream? I have sipped  
the bottom of many grande skinny  
Sugar-free lattes with three pumps of hazelnut  
and found myself lacking.

Coffee, black, doesn't need anyone  
to taste its bitter strength.

Should I stop already, I have so far to drive.  
There is no short drive to anywhere in Texas  
a state too proud of its vastness.

My car finds each green mermaid  
perched on a brown metal pole,  
fins bent up in a tantric pose. No one  
could mistake her for a red headed  
hamburger pusher, too dependent

on red and yellow, too alarming

to ingest in this sea of logos.

## **4. Texas**

## **An Epithalamium Written in the Houston Hobby Airport Parking Lot**

After another Gulf Coast thunderstorm  
scatters well-wishers and flower petals,  
the humid sun shines for photo taxiing.  
What we do today in our wedding uniforms,  
is a forecast. We assign a gate to our future  
selves, that we love each other enough to overbook  
the every day and the long, slow lines  
of doubt, that the journey will be worth the wait.

We depart today for a new life  
fused with our old life, hearts checked  
twice and full. Our navigation charts are blank,  
but our gyroscope is true. Our journey with many  
stopovers is cleared for takeoff,  
bound for places we have only begun to imagine.

## Writing Poetry in Suburban Dallas

The clichéd writing places of coffee shops and bars are not difficult to locate. I can swing an SUV's wheel at any intersection and reach a Starbucks. The one with outdoor seating, cornered by a dry cleaner and smoothie shop? The shotgun shaped location, next to a tired egg roll themed restaurant? Or maybe the one with cushioned seats by Ameritrade and Chick-fil-a? It doesn't matter. I've gone to them all in a routine, but drinking local is hard with not a single coffee tree to harvest. when my parents keep sending Starbucks gift cards and

Today, I go to the only local coffee shop not thirty minutes away. A shopping center modeled after a French chateau, its cinder block and wood patio, an easy April choice when it's warm enough, but not melting. I will take my lunch and sometimes even my own coffee to write a few hours before driving to campus to teach.

For me, a coffeeshop is a place to sit and work, but for others a place to sit, not move, talk to others. Children climb on leather furniture, while their parents half watch. A stopover between stores or even home, by default it's hard not to wander over to discount clothing after grading too many essays. Should my poetry celebrate the abundance of choices? Target this week, next week Kroger, then Aldi. Enough time and gas, I would customize my shopping into a grocery story collage, in the way I pull words and images from whatever sticks to my poetry antenna, the image of a plastic bag, empty plastic wine bottles, free dental exam flyers. The endless pizza and Asian delivery brochures rubberbanded to my apartment door, enough to clog my arteries and belt line

for years. What's not poetic about the brightly concreted parking lots and pencil thin trees to let the ground breathe slightly.

## Revising a Median

Monday morning the Talking Heads  
are on my radio singing about transformed  
parking lots and outside my balcony window,  
a saw eats concrete  
away- abrasion by boredom.

A frontend loader pulls the crumbled concrete  
away, leaves a curbed crater.

Later, an autumn rain transforms  
it into a pool reflecting  
the slow stretch of car brake lights.

The next week delivers truckloads  
of dirt, manure, and mulch. Shovels  
level the once hollow median.

Buffalo grass, plants, and crepe myrtle offer  
passersbys a new, picturesque garden-  
  
away from steering wheels and cellphone screens,  
until they notice the way tall ornamental grass hides

empty Big Gulps and cigarette butts.

## Missing Cars

I suddenly miss two abandoned cars,  
the way they hugged a short stretch  
of curb on the street near my apartment  
complex, with its own shrubs, overgrown  
flowerbeds, and brick. One, a teal Escort, a Texas plate  
hangs by one screw, half covers a Nebraska plate.  
*Thank your mom she chose life* reads a cracked  
sticker across its bumper. Its partner, a white dust  
Toyota Corolla, one window taped closed, a sticker  
praising rats on its rear window.

Unremarkable, it took months of passing  
by to notice their ever presence,  
like an empty bottle in a forest,  
the way leaves, empty cans and bottles collect  
to their tires that sag, discolor,  
as the two seemed less parked,  
and more abandoned, neon orange  
tow warning stickers appeared, disappeared  
suggested an unknown benefactor,  
caretaker, someone

sympathetic towards maintaining  
the two cars in our lives.

Then one day, they're gone  
towed away  
to whatever impound  
lot such vehicles go. Maybe someone is missing  
these cars, but the street's sameness blankets my walk  
by the brick apartment buildings,  
shrubs, grass, and dog shit. All lead my focus  
to small changes in porch decorations and even trash bags,  
all waiting to be carried away.

## Five Years in Texas

Maybe it's my Ohio  
driver's license and the matching  
plates on my tintless Honda  
Civic or the heat  
barbequing the fuck  
out of my brain, but some  
part of my body desires  
something Midwestern. If  
that means mild summers  
too cool for my parents'  
backyard pool, cold winters  
shoveling snow and ice, long  
last names peppered  
with *skis*, w's and z's, so be it.

Even as I become legally Texan, I'm quick  
to acknowledge I'm not  
from Texas. Yet, here on Houston's sticky  
streets, no one is from Texas  
or at least Houston. According to the *Field  
Guide to Texans*, Texans only live

outside of Houston or Dallas, the lack  
of flat nothing missing,  
though I call shopping centers strip malls.  
Hearing *strip mall's* negative tone,  
my wife asks about the phrase.  
*Strip's* negative echo, my Midwest  
or Appalachia vocabulary where strip  
meant mining or even urban  
sprawl's planting payday  
advances, dry cleaners, and Subways.

Here, it's the air that stripped  
by traffic and blinking knots  
of oil refineries. On her uncle's backyard  
boat dock in nearby Bay Town, my Wife  
recalls summers spent in the bay's muddy  
waters, no questions of what resides  
in the water that splashes the shore.  
One way or another, place seeps  
into us, particle by particle.

## Denton

I-35 E North is proof that God hates Texas.

A tangle of cars, like my headphone  
cords at the bottom of a bag. Once I weave  
my Civic through concrete barriers, trucks,  
Oklahoma plates, the road unweaves to Denton,  
my college-town-away-from-college town  
when my own university forgot to create  
its own in Richardson, the cusp of Dallas  
with hookah bars and a ten pm closing time,  
its cramped campus surrounded  
by walled suburbs, students have to trek  
through to get to a Subway that has slightly more  
sandwiches than the Subway in the student union.

Denton, free of most artificial ingredients,  
a bubble of small Austin, a town square  
where the only corporate intrusion, Subway, went  
out of business last month after student and local disdain.  
It's local used book store big in its embrace of poetry and jazz CDs  
perfect for any time I'm on the square.

My wife went barefoot there for a year, sitting out  
beneath an oak tree, practicing with her African  
drumming class where a nearby sandwich shop would pass  
out leftover bread without significance. Some of her friends  
will always live in Denton, no reason to move out or move on.

I can't blame them. I just might too if, if I didn't need  
to go to Dallas or anywhere else down I-35, choked  
with cars, a train goes between Denton and Carrollton.  
Every time I go to Denton, I consider using it. Why  
wouldn't anyone like me who rolled  
at the speed of an automatic carwash track use it?  
A passenger train is a rare sight in an oil state.

Denton, almost out of Texas, doesn't belong  
in Oklahoma or anywhere in the Bible belt,  
but as I make the trip to hear a few poets  
read in a bar, it is right where it belongs.

## Leaving Dallas

Driving home from a friend's birthday party, a pickup truck runs a red light, screeches around a corner police sirens trailing. A few second earlier and this truck might have hit us. How do you know if a place is hostile? Is it the people, indifferent or unfriendly, friends who put themselves before you, always?

We spend a lot of time imagining the day we can set out on George Bush, detach from this impatient city. You're sure our friends here will forget us as soon as our mailing address changes. Already so many have crossed over into acquaintances. Their plans spark bright, then fade like crumpled newspaper kindling. We see them just enough to remember their names. Others we keep in infrequent status, their quirks and cloud of drama too sticky to hold in our head or in person.

Dallas divides between walled, gated communities and corporate offices, money, and jobs. Even the local community colleges keep full-time jobs locked behind six-year adjunct sentences. Dallas isn't a city anyone stays in on purpose. It cringes away from Austin and even Denton, the nearest college town.

We're certain we both came here to meet each other. No more, no less. Together we will leave, headed for somewhere we think won't feel so against the grain.

## To Go to Houston

To go Houston takes time on I-45  
South from Dallas, more than anything  
else to wait and watch cars and trucks  
feed into more lanes and streets to see  
brake lights flare the speed limit to zero.

Prepare to stop at Buc-ee's or two, the gas  
station has been chipping away at your memory  
with billboards about bathrooms and food.

Prepare to perspire, no, sweat for months. Air conditioning  
un-feels shirt sticky against your back, to feel the air glue  
your nose, to feel socks aren't necessary  
most months, to feel a breeze as the exit,  
to feel hot sun bake a car, to feel

how long it takes to reach Conroe, then South Houston. To crawl  
block by block to laugh silently when your inlaws say how glad  
they are you moved back to Houston, when you never  
lived here until now. When you're here, no more trips left  
between the state's two heavyweights and now that you're here,  
no one really cares. They might run into you or they might not.

You go to Houston because it's time to move, to see  
what this city might get out of you yet.

## **New Year's Eve in a Houston Coffee Shop**

New Year is Christmas's hollow echo. A theme party that changes little each year. Home bound with an infant since before Christmas, I drop my wife and daughter at a friend's house to run a few errands, then drink coffee while reading a few books.

People rush before everything closes even though everything will be open tomorrow.

A few seconds into a late lunch, my wife calls to ask me to come back to her brother's house, my sister-in-law and nephews are locked out by miscommunication.

New Year's day is a holiday created by calendar and alcohol companies, anywhere four seasons exist only on paper. Houston's seasons are three at most, two at least. Hot and humid or cold and rainy. Fall and winter separated by foliage.

I'm reluctant to celebrate this new year. A year that brings transition, relocation, un(der) employment, new parent pressures in a city without family support.

Even in Houston, we joke, where my wife's family lives in number, few provide much help with our daughter. Only parents want to hold a crying baby, but really our daughter is easy until she hits teething and starts to crawl towards danger

We too could relearn a thing or two if we could crawl towards instead of away from it like burned fingers and bruises tries to tell us. As I close my notebook and take my near empty coffee to go, I don't know what I'll be next year, but here or elsewhere scrawling to the bottom, line by line.

## Refuse

After we finish combining  
our two apartments, the stacks  
of boxes, chairs, book shelves and stuff  
threatens to spill out and over  
our balcony, we have to stream  
line, move the unnecessary  
out to where all apartment  
dwellers place everything,  
the green dumpster with its wide  
mouth, black plastic lid. It suffers  
to accommodate everything.

I have too much stuff. For months I've been shedding  
books, clothes, shoes, things I once clutched  
in my last move in a vain, self-preserving  
desperation to keep (cooking utensils, light bulbs  
for a car I no longer own), now, after not using  
for years, can safely lose. I save things  
based on their usefulness, though maybe not

the heavy manual typewriter. My wife keeps  
things because of their history, Coptic Saint  
icons, African masks, a curved vintage mirror,  
whatever tells visitors that someone artistic  
resides between blank apartment white walls.  
Moving makes me crazy  
to toss things, to not really provide closure,  
not quite clean the oven, yet attempt to patch  
a hole in the drywall, toss half empty mustard jars,  
because it's one less thing to unpack.

## Friday Mornings at Inversion Coffee Shop

When we were first dating and driving to Houston to visit your family, we'd drive to Montrose to do the vague thing known as school work and to revisit your old neighborhood, a place you still dream about wandering through. I wish we could live here between bars, coffee shops, thrift stores, but between adjuncting, paying for our daughter's daycare, and a sliver of student loans, our checking account is short a few zeroes. Having a baby puts it even further away, but I visit it weekly every Friday anyway, this semester's free day, and only in the sense I don't need to fly to a campus in a far corner of Houston.

Change is painful in the way it takes away the familiar to translate your life into new walls and lose the familiar tendrils staying put brings through people and places. *We're so glad you moved back* friends and family tell us. I want to correct them *no, I've never lived here*, but it becomes pointless, almost as pointless as these trips out of my west Houston neighborhood, whose main quality is being inside the Loop of interstate 610. The coffee shop is remodeling, taking down walls of art, cutting tables and benches. Yet, I know it isn't pointless to decide where I'm going for the morning. I've been sitting in a coffee shop somewhere for years, sailing off my apartment, even when I need to grade or feed a washing machine, grabbing my backpack and riding down the Southwest freeway, down Spur 288's funnel to broken pavement. The now familiar Greek restaurants and car washes drift into this tall place to sit and only let a pen or page move in time to coffee cups.

## **Before I Leave for Thanksgiving**

Blue metal beams spread out like trees fenced by scattered leaves. What are we thankful for? A door grinds against its metal sill. “She’s all better now.” Yellow caution plastic ribbon wards the sidewalk outside. A wet limestone smell slips inside my mouth. “The stalemate was the latest sign” of my full bladder that promises to unfasten my belt buckle. “I really don’t want to do this.” In Zone 3 there is no exit for hyperlearning.

## **The Farce**

This time we advance antique cannon at the lines of Vicksburg and Floyd. From a blue Honda Civic, I trace a crescent wrench with metamorphic rock shard, enough to plague topsoil. Meanderthals cross, unfazed and unchanged, their hands cup steady screen glows. All pedestrians aside, I did not bivouac in Plano to masticate the indifferent. Blame the glissando of street lamps for driving the skirmish forward.

## Retread

The many interstate exits I skip  
wear me smooth like the road I turn  
against until weary of contact and homelessness;  
I no longer wanted to be a tire.

What I would do to no longer move. Swing  
on a backyard tree in Houston. Surround mesquite  
trees at a rest stop near Tucson as mulch,  
repave highways. Under the familiar  
touch, I might wear down,  
the sun's radiation will burn away my tire-ness.

Instead, recast with new tread  
all over again, I'm back  
on the road to everywhere.  
This new grafted tread  
will grapple black top,  
too, but I worry  
my old surface will come exploding  
back one long trip.  
When will this new shell shred

on an unpaved road? It wouldn't  
be the last failure  
on a stretch of I-10 outside El Paso  
where nothing but Yucca plants and debris tumble  
by the wheels rolling to and fro.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Originally from the hilly corner of Ohio, Mark Allen Jenkins is the former Editor-in-Chief for *Reunion: The Dallas Review*. His poetry has appeared in *Memorious*, *minnesota review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Every River on Earth: Writing from Appalachian Ohio* and *Gargoyle*. He currently lives and teaches in Houston with his wife and daughter.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

### Mark Allen Jenkins

#### EDUCATION

**PhD, Humanities** *May 2017*  
Aesthetic Studies Creative Writing Emphasis  
University of Texas—Dallas

**PhD, English Literature**  
Creative Writing Concentration  
University of Louisiana—Lafayette  
Degree not completed.

**Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing** *May 2004*  
Poetry Emphasis  
Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH

**Bachelor of Arts, English** *May 2000*  
Creative Writing Concentration  
Miami University, Oxford, OH.

#### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teacher, Spring Branch School District—  
Memorial High School *August 2016 to Present*

- AP English Language
- English III Dual Credit
- Academic

**Adjunct**, Houston Community College—Northwest *August 2015 to May 2016*  
Designed and taught two courses each semester.

- Eng 1302: Composition and Rhetoric II

**Instructor**, University of Houston *August 2015 to May 2016*  
Taught three hybrid courses each semester.

- Engi 2034: Technical Communication for Engineers

**Adjunct Instructor**, Lone Star College—Kingwood *August 2015 to December 2015*  
Designed and taught two courses each semester.

- Eng 1302: Composition and Rhetoric II

**Teaching Assistant**, University of Texas—Dallas *August 2010 to May 2015*  
Designed and taught one to two courses each semester.

- Lit 2334: Masterpieces of World Literature

- CWRT 2301: Introduction to Creative Writing
- RHET 1302: Intermediate Composition

**Adjunct Instructor**, Southern Louisiana Community College *August 2009 to May 2010*

Designed and taught several different English courses each semester.

- English 92: Introduction to College Composition
- English 1010: Rhetoric and Composition
- English 1020: Composition and Critical Thought, a dual enrollment course at Vermillion Catholic High School

**Teaching Assistant**, University of Louisiana—Lafayette *August 2007 to August 2009*

Designed and taught several different courses each semester.

- English 203: Poetry and Drama
- English 206: American Literature II: 1865 to the Present
- English 223: Introduction to Creative Writing
- English 90: Developmental English

**Adjunct Instructor**, University of Louisiana—Lafayette *Various, 2005 to 2007*

Designed and taught English courses each semester.

- English 101: Rhetoric and Composition
- English 102: Research and Writing about Culture

**Adjunct Instructor**, Brown Mackie College Findlay *February 2005 to June 2005*

Conducted monthly fast-paced intensive courses

- COM 1101 Composition I
- COM 1102 Composition II
- HUM 2000 Introduction to Literature
- PSS 1200 Business Communication

Instructor of the Month, May 2005.

**Part-time Instructor**, Bowling Green State University *August 2004 to December 2004*

Designed and conducted two English sections.

- English 111- Introductory Writing

**Teaching Assistant**, Bowling Green State University *August 2002 to May 2004*

Designed and taught several different English courses each semester

- English 111- Introductory Writing
- English 112- Varieties of Writing
- English 208- Imaginative Writing

#### RELATED EXPERIENCE

**Writing Tutor**, SMARTHINKING/Pearson *August 2010 to October 2016*  
Tutor student writing assignments from a wide range of courses and backgrounds using asynchronous and live whiteboard sessions.

**AP English Language Reader**, College Board *June 2014 to Present*  
Evaluate and score high school student writing for college credit.

**Editor-in-Chief, Assistant Editor, Poetry Editor** *August 2011 to November 2014*  
*Reunion: the Dallas Review*  
Published annual journal issue. Represented and promoted journal at AWP annual National Conference. Read and select poetry submissions for inclusion in journal, solicit writers, and proofread text.

**Co-founder, Poetry and Book Review Editor** *February 2007 to July 2010*  
*Rougarou: a literary journal.*  
Read poetry and book review submissions, solicited writers, and proofread text.

**Poetry Reader** *2007 to Present*  
*Best of the Net Anthology*  
Read poetry submissions for a yearly anthology of the best poetry published in online journals.

**Poetry Editor** *2006 to 2007*  
*Southwestern Review* University of Louisiana-Lafayette's in house student Literary Journal.  
Read poetry submissions.

**Abstract Reader**, Graduate Student Conference *2005 to 2007*  
University of Louisiana-Lafayette  
Read and evaluated abstracts for conference.

**Placement Reader**, Bowling Green State University *2003 to 2004*  
Evaluated placement essays written by incoming first-year students.

**Writing Tutor**, Bowling Green State University Writers Lab *August to December 2003*  
Worked individually with undergraduate and graduate students to help improve and develop their writing skills.

**Assistant Editor**, *Mid-American Review* Literary Journal. *August 2002 to December 2003.*  
Read poetry submissions, solicited writers, proofread text, and wrote book reviews.

## PUBLICATIONS

### Poetry

- “Cocoons.” *Gargoyle*. 64, 2016.
- “Re-enactment Lawn Service.” *The Great American Wise Ass Poetry Anthology*. Beaumont, Texas; Lamar University Press. 2016.
- “Playground Supervisor at Cuddy Dixon Memorial Park.” *The Gambler*. November 2015. (online)
- “Reading James Wright During a Louisiana Afternoon Thunderstorm I Realize There Are Worse Places to Live Than Zanesville, Ohio.” *Every River on Earth: Writing from Appalachian Ohio*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015.
- “Removing Hurricane Debris.” *Stone Highway Review*, 4.1 October 2014. (online)
- “Atlas’s Weight” Silver Birch Press, 2014. (online)
- “Altoids.” *A Touch of Saccharine*, Kind of a Hurricane Press, 2014.
- “Disposable.” *Gravel: A Literary Journal*, May 2014. (online)
- “The Black Knight.” *[Insert Coin Here]*, Kind of a Hurricane Press, 2013.
- “Forklift Tattoo” *Workers Write! Tales from the Concrete Highway*, 2013.
- “The Trouble With Explorers.” *Wild Goose Poetry Review*, Summer 2012. (online)
- “The Snow Plow Driver.” *Shot Glass Journal*, 7, 2012. (online)
- “New Carcass.” *Shot Glass Journal*, 7, 2012. (online)
- “Dangerous Safety Tips.” *MOTIF 3: Work*, 2011.
- “Removal.” *Memorious*, 14, April 2010.
- “Voiding Your Warranty.” *Work Literary Magazine*, 1.19, 2010. (online)
- “Compost.” *RE:AL: Regarding Arts and Letters*, 32.2, 2008.
- “Sometimes, I Think.” *Muse & Stone*, 2008.
- “Produce.” *South Dakota Review*, 45.3, 2007.
- “George Washington Reconsiders the Crossing.” *Nexus*, 43, 2007.
- “Fixing a Window.” *Nexus*, 43, 2007.
- “Re-enactment Lawn Service.” *Clare*, 9, 2007.
- “At the Existentialist Bar.” *Square One*, 4, 2006.
- “Roof Gutters.” *FOCUS*, 2006.
- “It’s On Days Like These When I Stare at the Chainsaws.” *The Minnesota Review*, 63-64, 2005.
- “Counting in One.” *Big Toe Review*, 2005. (online)
- “Forklift Tattoo.” *Georgetown Review*, 1.6, 2005.
- “St. Matthews’s Impatience.” *Chaffin Journal*, 2005.
- “False Moon.” *Yalobusha Review*, 10, 2005.
- “The End of Leichhardt’s Map.” *Faultline*, 13, 2004.
- “De-evolution.” *GW Review*, 25.1, 2003.
- “Why I Grind.” *Thorny Locust*, 11, 2003.
- “Civil War Photographs.” *Sycamore Review*, 15, 2003.
- “On Sale.” *PoetryMidwest*, 4, 2002.

### Book Reviews

- “Seth Brady Tucker’s Mormon Boy.” *Stirring: A Literary Collection*. November 2014. (online).
- “Lesle Jenike’s *Holy Island*.” *American Microreviews and Interviews*. August 2014. (online).

### Book Reviews (continued)

- “Hugh Martin’s *The Stick Soldiers*.” *American Microreviews and Interviews*. July 2014. (online).
- “Nate Pritts’s *Right Now More Than Ever*.” *American Microreviews and Interviews*. June 2014. (online).
- “Raphael Dagold’s *Bastard Heart*.” *American Microreviews and Interviews*. May 2014. (online).
- “Victoria Chang’s *The Boss*.” *Stirring: A Literary Collection*. February 2014. (online).
- “Joe Wilkin’s *Notes From the Journey Westward*.” *Stirring: A Literary Collection*. August 2013 (online).
- “Rebecca Morgan Frank’s *Little Murders Everywhere*. *Mid-American Review*. 33.2 (2013): 158-159.
- “Paige Ackerson-Kiely’s *My Love is a Dead Artic Explorer*. *Stirring: A Literary Collection*. March 2013 (online).
- “Mark Strand’s ‘Hammer’ ” *Mid-American Review*. 24.2 (2004): 206.
- “Nick Flynn’s ‘Blind Huber’ ” *Mid-American Review*. 24.1 (2003): 165-166.

## PRESENTATIONS

- Poetry Reading. Pegasus Reading Series, Dallas, Texas, June 2015.
- Poetry Reading. Scissortail Creative Writing Festival, Ada, Oklahoma, April 2015.
- Poetry Reading. The Kraken Reading Series, Denton, Texas, November 2014.
- “I Can’t Wait to Get Off Work: Writing about the Workplace.” Culture of Writing Festival. Mountain View College, April 2014.
- “Dallas Small Press and Journal Roundtable.” A Discussion Panel At LitFest, Southern Methodist University, March 2014.
- Poetry Reading. UNT Graduate Students of English Conference. University of North Texas, March 2014.
- “The Conscious Distance Between Human Beings: The Poetry of C.K. Williams and Robert Hass.” Paper Presented at Coastal Plains Conference, University of Houston, April 2013.
- “Underrepresented Places: Poems.” Reading presented at RAW [Research Art Writing] – An interdisciplinary Graduate Student Symposium, University of Texas at Dallas, 2013.
- “Avant-garde Gone Astray: The Problem of Experience in Cecilia Vicuña and Raúl Zurita.” Paper Presented at SC/MLA, San Antonio, Texas, November 2012.
- “Charles Olson: Anarchist of Morning.” Paper presented at RAW [Research Art Writing] – An interdisciplinary Graduate Student Symposium, University of Texas at Dallas, March 2012.
- “Playing with Art: Ekphrastic Poetry in the Creative Writing Classroom.”

Paper presented at M/MLA, St, Louis, Missouri, November 2011.

“The Dynamics of Work: Poems.” Reading presented at RAW  
[Research Art Writing] – An interdisciplinary Graduate Student Symposium,  
University of Texas at Dallas, March 2011.

“Camping Out in the Gray: A Prose Poem Discussion.” Workshop presented  
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