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THE TWO MINDS OF A WESTERN POET

"Where I live distance is the primal fact"
-James Galvin

From my study window I look out on a stand of aspen trees mixed with a few spruce and pines, across the road more woods and the half-disguised houses of neighbors, each tactfully set on its half acre. A generation ago this was a dude ranch outside the mountain town of Woodland Park, Colorado. I have distant relatives who worked here in those days—tourist wranglers. Now Paradise Estates is a bedroom community incorporated into the growing town, squeezed between Highway 24 and the National Forest. Most of us commute twenty miles to Colorado Springs to make our livings.

Woodland Park is a town one drives through on the way to Cripple Creek or the Collegiate Range and beyond. From the highway it hardly resembles a community at all, just a line of nondescript shops and gas stations anchored by two supermarkets. You would have to turn off the highway to see a set of schools and a lot of churches, the old

log cabins of what once was a summer town. Recently, local artists have been trying to convince city leaders that we need art. Art helps build communities, they argue, pointing to good evidence from other parts of the nation. Not wanting to seem philistine and wanting even less to pass up any economic opportunity, our leaders have sprinkled statuary here and there. Even the most powerful land developer in town sees dollar signs in his neighbors' good will efforts. Everyone tries to ignore the highway plowing through town with its increasing volume of traffic splitting the community in two.

This is the West, or part of it, and I am a product of the West. I grew up in Bellingham, Washington, the middle son of two highly educated Colorandans who had moved there after World War II. A recent newspaper story about the snipers in the Washington D. C. area tells me the gunmen used to live in Bellingham, "a Mecca for people who want to be as far away as possible from wherever they are from." That's my home town, which was a lot smaller when I lived there than it is now. It occurs to me that I must have been twenty years old before I saw great art in a museum. I certainly saw art in books and my parents' slides from a trip to Europe. There were works of local artists in our house, and I might have glimpsed others in museums in Seattle and Vancouver B. C. I was dimly aware that a great poet, Theodore Roethke, lived in Seattle, and I had a book about the paintings of Mark Tobey. I got to know a bit of music because my high school girlfriend played the violin, my father listened to public radio, my older brother recorded albums on reel-to-reel tapes. I saw good theatre in Seattle and at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, slept through some opera, acted in high school plays.

At nineteen I unloaded crab and shrimp boats in Alaska for seven months—turning twenty in the Aleutians—then headed overseas, where I hitch-hiked the perimeter

of the British Isles and dallied on the Continent. I saw London's museums and bought Upper Circle tickets to every play on boards. I also saw plays in Edinburgh and Dublin. In the reading room of the British Museum I stared at original manuscripts of Yeats and Shaw, feeling embarrassed for the American girl cracking her chewing gum over the glass cases and exclaiming, "Jesus! Wow!" In Paris and Madrid I saw more great museums. I carried books in my rucksack and mailed them home when I had read them. I took in culture as I took in English beer—in huge swallows. I made sketches, notes, thought of myself as an artist, a real down-and-outer.

But drawn as I was to these famous centers of the arts, I was also happy to be hoofing it alone, my conversations internal or made with any kindly stranger who gave me a lift. Even the attractions of a city like Madrid could not hold me for long. I felt compelled to the margins and spent a month in Almería on the Costa Blanca. There I fell into a regular life of reading in cafes, swimming, exploring, flirting with Spanish girls, then returning to my pension to read some more and bother the neighbors with late-night hammering on my portable typewriter.

Culture, including all the boozy rebellion of the arts, was something I could only take in small doses. The greatest museums in the world made me feel claustrophobic after a while, and I hated competing with crowds even to see a masterpiece. I was a Westerner—an American far-Westerner, that is—from a small town, not a barrio, and crowds were alien to me. One moment I could enjoy their anonymity, the next I was fighting for air. In a forest I felt at home but starved for the sort of intensity art promises. In museums I felt alien, my culture-thirst slaked, my soul pummeled and quaking. I was

born divided—perhaps not so uncommon a fate. Poetry is for me an attempt to find unity of being, and as such it is a meditative process made public through stories and forms.

As a product of the American West in the fifties and sixties, I am of two minds about culture. I desire the arts like some unpossessable diamond, yet I desire their absence with equal force. Without art I feel sick, half alive, yet cruising an empty highway or hiking under a glacier can sooth me like a prayer. After twenty years away from the West (living in Greece, New York, Pittsburgh and Minnesota) I'm happy to be back in a state where I have some roots and know the lay of the land. But Colorado is, like most states in the West, such a cultural backwater that I'm often driven to despair. One can live a lifetime here convinced that all the important values are Christian and commercial, using the Rockies only as a place to burn fuel and make noise. One can be completely unaware of Bierstadt's paintings of these landscapes, or even the peak that bears his name, let alone poets from Longfellow on down who have celebrated parts of the state. As a state of mind, Colorado is generally blank or cluttered with the sprawling dreck of contemporary America. Yet I am more at home here than in most places I have lived as an adult, and fully aware that landscapes like the one outside my window have shaped my writing as much as the wall of books beside my desk.

The two minds I refer to are not unrelated to the most ancient theories of art. Plato saw poets as vessels for sacred inspiration, which made them dangerous to the ideal state. That idea resembles modern beliefs that creativity comes straight from the uninhibited soul and requires no education or training. Traces of America's native Platonism can be found in poets from the Transcendentalists to the Beats. Aristotle, on the other hand, was the classifier of forms, suggesting that indeed some training in traditions was required,

and such notions can be traced forward to Longinus, Lu Chi, T. S. Eliot, etc. Most theories of poetry choose from a menu of ideas about inspiration or craft as if the twain could never meet, when in fact they *must* meet in the creation of good poems. Writing is in part an attempt to reconcile these warring factions within.

For most of us, America is like a wind blowing our voices away in the midst of each day's effort to speak. Yet I can't help feeling we have it worse in the West—something to do with the distances between us. Perhaps we are more attuned to change and blank indifference, creatures of sprawl and space, our geological consciousness almost impervious to graffiti or poems.

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"…I died without nails, without a copy of the
Atlantic Monthly…."
-Charles Bukowski

The West is made of watersheds. The Missouri River, fed by the Yellowstone, the Bighorn, the Powder, the Platte, flows into the Mississippi drainage to be joined by the Arkansas. Northwest, the Snake, the Columbia, the Willamette, and moving south, the Russian, the Sacramento, the San Joaquin—these find the Pacific at various points on the coast. Then you have the major drainages of the Rio Grande and the Colorado, without which life in the Southwest would be inconceivable.

Use the Missouri as a line drawn east and south, then at Kansas City pick up the eastern borders of Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas; you've got a pretty good place to start

defining the West as a region, taking into account its components: the plains, the Rockies, the Southwest, Northwest, California and Texas. Rivers and mountains are the veins and bones of this sprawled body. Gary Snyder chose well when he titled his long poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. And Louis Simpson had the right idea in his poem "The Redwoods," which begins like this:

> Mountains are moving, rivers
> are hurrying. But we
> are still.
>
> We have the thoughts of giants—
> clouds, and at night the stars.

Simpson's move from landscape to mind reminds me that geography helps, but not enough. There is a West of the mind. There is a West of many minds. The enclaves of religious fundamentalists, the back road survivalists, the developers, the greens, the tramps, the ski bums and bookworms and barrio gangs, the vast neighborhoods of the newly arrived, the computer geeks and ex-dot.com'ers. The West is like an imaginary marketplace where visions rise and fall. One invests in pasts as well as futures.

I had read Simpson's poem before, but had not been struck by it as I was when I opened *Poems of the American West* (Everyman Editions, 2002), a new anthology edited by Robert Mezey, and stumbled on it again. "O if there is a poet," Simpson writes, "let him come now!" He's arrived at the terminus of American expansion, the end of the Open Road, but finds something as yet unexpressed in the land itself. I know what he means. Born at the tail end of 1954, I grew up with a strong sense that it had all been seen

and done, we had reached our limits, but I was troubled by an equally strong conviction that much remained to be said.

Mezey's anthology is a good place to start, not least because of his humility before so vast a subject. "I am as little qualified as most poets or scholars," he writes in his Foreword, "to set up as an authority on the poetry of the American West. True, I grew up in West Philadelphia, and have spent most of the last thirty-five years in the West, mostly in California, but neither accident has given me the slightest confidence that I know what the West is, or even where it is." An accomplished poet and translator, Mezey has also been one of our most intriguing anthologists, from the *Naked Poetry* volumes of the sixties and seventies, edited with Stephen Berg, to his superb Modern Library edition of *The Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1999). His taste is catholic in the best sense—like his friend Donald Justice he has written marvelous poems in both free verse and meter—and is reflected in the poems chosen for the new book.

Most anthologists these days collect *poets* for the purpose of building careers. But in this case Mezey collects *poems*, and therein lies a lesson. He is not necessarily interested in promoting writers who live in the West, however one defines the region. I appreciate the personal touch in Mezey's selection, the willed eccentricity of a book called *Poems of the American West* that includes work by Guillaume Apollinaire, Zbigniew Herbert and Rhina Espaillat. Mezey acknowledges that West of the mind I mentioned earlier, finds aspects of its mythos in poems from all over the world.

Taking this strategy to heart, one could make a very fat anthology. Cowboys and western landscapes show up in some surprising places. Off the cuff I think of Seamus Heaney defining Ireland as a place without prairies, and one could no doubt find poets

from Asian countries making use of the American West as a source of irony or dream of freedom. As Mezey himself admits, his book is not definitive, nor could it be. It is instead a fascinating compendium mostly of good poems arising from physical experiences of place as well as from mental geographies. He includes a selection of traditional Native American poems in translation as well as a fair representation of living poets of various backgrounds, and he does not exclude Country and Western lyrics or traditional songs like John Phillips's mordant "Me and My Uncle" and Fred Koller's "Lone Star State of Mind":

> And here I sit alone in Denver,
> Sippin' the California wine,
> And I've got all night to remember you—
> I'm in a Lone Star state of mind.

Mezey reminds us that Robert Frost spent his early years as an urban Californian. It irked me that he included Frost's misguided poem "The Gift Outright" until I saw it echoed nearly two hundred pages later in Larry Levis's "The Poet at Seventeen." Far from endorsing Manifest Destiny, Mezey merely points out how powerful a myth it remains. I am also glad to see strong work by Charles Bukowski, James Galvin, B. H. Fairchild, Mark Jarman, Timothy Murphy, Ted Kooser, Nancy Ware and others. There are poems by the brilliant student of Donald Justice, Joe Bolton, who committed suicide and whose work Justice generously edited. And there is a knockout of a poem by Suzanne Doyle, "Heart's Desire":

> Somewhere above King's Canyon, having crossed
> An unmarked pass, tonight you'll make your bed

In alpine air, lay down your tender head
Among the rocks that glaciers ground and tossed
Within that wide angle of time: the Ice Age.
This is the country of your heart's desire,
The granite cut to peaks, luring you higher,
The mind but blood and muscle schooled for passage.
You stare into the stellar void and wait.
Empty, alone, the god can enter in
Not so unlike the fiend who was your fate,
The one that took you small, again, again,
Broke you in two and still might break you more.
It is inhuman beauty, cold, austere,
You open to receive without a fear,
Arousing your remote and shattered core
To the release that only it can bring:
Annihilation of the self by Nothing.

I ponder that last line with its nearly Buddhist promise and wonder if the annihilation of the self by Nothing isn't also a condition of the American West, a blessed curse of living where I do. But just as I grasp it the image blurs and evaporates like breath on a windowpane.

King's Canyon, the setting of Doyle's poem, was also a favorite setting for Kenneth Rexroth, who can be found in these pages with J. V. Cunningham, Yvor Winters, Gary Snyder, John Haines, William Stafford, Edgar Bowers, Timothy Steele, R.

S. Gwynn, Alberto Rios, Ron Koertge, Lawson Fusao Inada, Suzanne Lummis, Olivia Simpson Ellis and N. Scott Momaday. Mezey has cast a wide net but pursed it tightly, printing no poem that he did not genuinely like. The fact that his taste will not always be yours or mine does not really matter. One reads anthologies like this one partly to escape one's preconceptions.

Still, the book lacks two poems I wish it had included, by Thomas McGrath and Richard Wilbur. McGrath was such an uneven writer that one has to look hard for his best work. Born in North Dakota, he was known for his communist sympathies, which in his bad work bent him toward propaganda. But he was also a spirited writer about the West, as you can see in his short lyric "The Buffalo Coat":

> I see him moving, in his legendary fleece,
> Between the superhighway and an Algonquin stone axe;
> Between the wild tribes, in their lost heat,
> And the dark blizzard of my Grandfather's coat;
> Cold with the outdoor cold caught in the curls,
> Smelling of the world before the poll tax.
>
> And between the new macadam and the Scalp Act
> They got him by the short hair; had him clipped
> Who once was wild—and all five senses wild—
> Printing the wild with his hoof's inflated script
> Before the times was money in the bank,
> Before it was a crime to be so mild.

> But history is a fact, and moves on feet
> Sharper than his, toward wallows deeper than.
> And the myth that covered all his moving parts,
> Grandfather's time had turned into a coat;
> And what kept warm then, in the true world's cold
> Is old and cold in a world his death began.

That "world his death began" is, in a sense, the West I inhabit as I write this, my house perched on a hill between the South Platte and the Arkansas, on the north shoulder of Pikes Peak, a mountain that inspired both "America the Beautiful" and a moronic road race.

The second poem I miss in Mezey's anthology, Richard Wilbur's "Piccola Commedia," recalls a year in which the young poet tramped across America prior to his service in World War II. The poem is too long to quote here, but I would add it to Mezey's anthology because of its vivid evocation of fallen dreams and the transience I associate with the West. I find it again in J. V. Cunningham's poems. And Donald Justice writing of Henry James in California: "The sad-faced monsters of the plains are gone; / Wall Street controls the wilderness."

Where is the American West? My definitions scatter. It's in the helicopter cowboys over Saigon. It's in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* with—who else?—John Wayne. It's in the Japanese grocer huddled against Seattle rain, the *campesinos* playing one-armed bandits on a reservation in California. The old Monument Valley of John Ford has its mythology, and while that mythology will not suffice it also will not die away. Maybe the

American West is in those snipers who left my home town and crossed the country on a trail of bodies. The stories are too many to be told, which means the poets still have much to tell us.

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"Transience is not symbolic, it is real
In the unfurnished places of our lives
So bare of ghosts. . . ."
-Charles Gullans

Before me a window full of trees; to my left a wall of books. The latter includes a six-volume edition of the complete works of Charles Dickens, large illustrated tomes with double columns of small print. They were published in New York by P. F. Collier, and though they bear no copyright date they must be from the late 19th Century. Each volume is signed inside:

Geo. Mason

Shelbina

Mo.

This would be my great-grandfather, George. His father, Abraham, had come west from Kentucky and edited a newspaper in Paris, Missouri. Each generation lugged what bits of cultural life it could carry on the journey west. But they wouldn't have chosen such an arduous path if they hadn't been restless, eager for new life. It was George who made his way to Colorado, eventually running a mercantile store in Cedar Hill for coal miners. South of Pueblo and north of Trinidad, Cedar Hill was more a camp than a town, a few

shacks and a lot of tents, I suppose. Almost no trace of that community remains. At a family reunion twenty years ago some of us Masons tramped over that dry ground, noted a few concrete slabs, shards of broken glass among scrub and cacti, the squinting eye of a mine shaft and not much more. Such vanished towns are an image of the West for me. There have been other deserted villages in other countries, but I know of no landscape quite so marked by transience as the American West.

A more famous camp than Cedar Hill was at Ludlow. When miners in those communities went on strike, John D. Rockefeller's henchmen used their influence to send in troops, a measure culminating in the Ludlow Massacre of April 1914. By then, after acting as postmaster in the town of Walsenburg, George Mason had moved to Trinidad, a town on the Purgatory River, just north of the New Mexican border. Bat Masterson was once sheriff of Trinidad, and the famous train robber, Black Jack, was hanged on one of the town's streets. George went partners in a creamery, and soon manufactured Mason's Ice Cream with 20% butter fat instead of the minimum requirement of 10%. Their advertisements proclaimed, "MASON'S ICE CREAM—BETTER THAN THE LAW REQUIRES!"

I have a photograph of George and his four brothers as young men, taken in St. Louis, and they look like a reunion of the James Gang. I knew George's son, Abraham, my grandfather, as well as several of Abe's siblings. They were all characters. Abe ran off to Idaho as a young man, then crossed into Canada and joined the Seaforth Highlanders. He wore a kilt and fought with the regiment in World War I. At the Battle of Amiens he was carrying ammunition cases for a machine gun when a bullet or shell fragment went through his hand. The ammunition cases stopped that lead from piercing

his chest and killing him. After the war Abe returned to Trinidad with Ethel, the sweetheart he'd met in the Northwest, and they raised four red-headed boys, the eldest of whom was my father.

Abe could be a hell-raiser when he wanted. My Uncle Frank remembers him coming home drunk, explaining he had stopped off at so-and-so's to say hello, and Ethel would help him into bed saying, "Oh, Abe, look what you done to yourself."

But the man I remember was a calm, good-natured fellow who looked a lot like the actor Wallace Beery, smoked unfiltered cigarettes and took my brothers and me on long walks in the mesa country where we searched for arrowheads. My father had started him on that hobby back in the Dustbowl days when topsoil blew to hell and gone and ancient artifacts lay exposed for the picking. I grew up with old flint points, stone axes, *metates*, bone necklaces and even a rawhide medicine bag my father had traded for.

It was Abe who helped turn the creamery into a candy manufacturing company, so most males in my family were drummers selling TOMA, the Mason brand, in Colorado, New Mexico and the western plains. My Uncle Frank was a drummer for years, then took over the company when Abe retired. The price of sugar rose in the early seventies, driving them out of business, and eventually Frank left Trinidad for work outside Denver.

My father was the son who got as far away as he could. He used to save his paper route money, hitch-hike up to Colorado Springs or down to Raton and take flying lessons in bi-planes—this in 1936, when he was fifteen. Though he could hardly swim, he got himself selected for the Naval Academy when war broke out. His class was rammed through Anapolis in three years, fresh fodder for the Pacific war. Three of the four Mason

brothers served in World War II, and once they came home on leave at the same time and a photograph of them with their freckles removed was splashed on front pages across the country. The old photographer who removed their freckles used to make his living taking pictures of dead people and Indians.

My father married a Colorado girl, Evelyn Peterson, whose own father had once been a coal miner and had somehow become a doctor in Grand Junction. Evelyn's nickname was "Pete." Jim and Pete, my parents, eventually settled in Bellingham, "a Mecca for people who want to be as far away as possible from wherever they are from." For years I thought I had motion sickness—in this case an illness that means you will always be on the move.

Bellingham was a good place for my brothers and me to grow up. We had the run of the woods, lakes and mountains nearby. Despite all our troubles—my parents' eventual divorce, my mother's alcoholism, which she has fought bravely to overcome, my brother Doug's death while climbing Mt. Shuksan, the most beautiful peak in the North Cascades—we were not such a bad family. My parents worshipped education and encouraged any spark of ambition in their boys. But that desire to get out of town hit me hard at eighteen, and most of my adult life I have been on the move.

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"Eyes like small veiled moons
circling our single light, sleek
shadows with pawprints,
all went with the outfit; and
youth, a river of campfires."
-Rhina P. Espaillat

I won't pretend to like what is happening to the West. I don't like unbridled and tasteless development of land or water wasted on lawns. I don't like endless chains of strip malls, insane traffic, self-righteous boosterism, the endless variety of machines making noise and eroding soil in the mountains.

Of course, I'm part of the problem, aren't I? I don't live downtown and get about on a bike. I live on my wooded plot, just below a hill where many new houses will eventually be built, and like my neighbors I commute, usually alone due to my busy life, burning up gas and polluting the air.

As boys my brothers and I were outdoors all the time—sailing, skiing, climbing, hiking, sleeping under the stars. More often we slept under the rain. We were expert at building shelters with plastic tarps and bits of rope. I can't tell you how many days and nights of my youth were spent huddled under wet plastic, waiting for rain to stop, firing up the Primus stove to make cocoa or soup. I walked glaciers and snowfields as a boy, saw seals dive from British Columbian rocks, played Tarzan in the woods, pretending the long stems of bracken ferns were poison spears. We had to entertain ourselves. Very few people in the world, especially in our time, ever grow up with the freedom I enjoyed as a child. It may be something Americans have lost forever.

I was also lucky in my parents' friends, who loved to read and talk about everything under the sun. I grew up listening to people who were interested in the world, who could read the wind on Bellingham Bay and used days off to take their families into the mountains. They were generally left of center in their politics, agnostics who raised us without religious turmoil. My father began as an Eisenhower Republican but by the time

of Nixon declared he was a Socialist. Yet when he read of some random murder in Seattle he swung to a primal belief in revenge, saying that even hanging was too good for these killers. He joined Beyond War. He smoked pot. He took LSD with two women friends up in the mountains, and wrote pages of notes about the trip. His favorite literary character was Joyce Cary's Gulley Jimson, a model of creative irresponsibility, but he stayed true to his sons and helped us any way he could. He was a character of the West, I think—impulsive, contradictory, driven to succeed and fighting that drive in himself.

My mother, on the other hand, was someone for whom just leading a normal life seemed nearly impossible. Like her own mother—the Scottish grandmother I never met—she was an addict. Her mother had become a nurse, eventually losing jobs when she was caught stealing drugs. She ended up lobotomized in St. Louis, a real skeleton in the closet. My mother was smart and beautiful and haunted by more demons than most people could stand. I gave her up for dead so often that I, too, was haunted. I was afraid if I stopped moving my ghosts would catch up to me.

But the woman who once was a cause of my own rootlessness has, late in life, fought free of addiction, found real friends in AA, worked at her friendships and her citizenship with genuine humility, bearing her grief and her guilt and finding that uncanny humor recovering addicts have, everything leveled and cleared for rebuilding. My mother has put down roots. She has become a pillar of her community, someone to emulate and honor for the very simplicity of her life. This is the greatest gift she could possibly have given her two surviving sons. Because of what she has done, each of us now looks at life with a new sense of possibility and hope. My younger brother has become a father. I'm a step-father and grandfather. Maybe I will put down roots too.

Lately I have tried in poems to root myself in this place, to affirm something of value in living here even with the problems I have been mentioning. This is the only way I know to make two minds into one.

For most of us in the West, culture in that vague and desirable sense I've been using is not given but acquired, and not easily acquired at that. I think of poets I know in Colorado: Anne Waldman at Naropa, Mary Crow at Fort Collins, Mark Irwin in Denver, David Keplinger in Pueblo, Jim Tipton raising bees and writing poems in Grand Junction, Rosemerry Trommer running a poetry circle in Telluride, the wild David Rothman in Crested Butte, running a prep school in an old motel, publishing books at Conundrum Press and pushing a music festival on a ski town, Mark Todd on a ranch near Gunnison, Laurie Wagner Buyer on a ranch in the Mosquito Mountains. I also think of Steven Wingate and others crazy enough to run literary magazines, or Christine Citron running a Center for—of all things—the Book. We're all so far away from each other. It takes enormous effort, exhausting effort, to make a literary life in such a place. Most Colorado taxpayers would rather support missile defense systems than any of the arts. But there has always been a necessary stubbornness in the act of creation. Even the tug o'war between art and wilderness in souls like mine has not been bad for poetry, to use that one example. Our challenge in the West is to recognize the facts of living where we do, learn the lay of the land and its place in the larger world, and try to hold our voices steady in the wind.

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