Writers Night
A Sense of Place
Northfield, Minnesota
January 2017
# Writers Night
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## A Sense of Place

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Edited by Rob Hardy, Northfield Poet Laureate

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Larry Gavin  
Faribault, Minnesota  

Near Duck Creek: A Bee Speaks  

I am falling at the feet of a flower opening to me. Inviting me to land here in the stillness at its heart. I am singing the song a bee sings, shocked by the suddenness of all this. My dance from flower to hive. The rhythm, individual as a blossom, pressed in a dictionary; joining—like a rainbow—horizon to hope.
Bagamoya

I travel all the way to Africa
to leave behind the reality of my life,
to pull out that double edged obsession,
betrayal and abandonment,
to live and teach in Tanzania.
Like a newborn baby,
I soak in another side of the world.
As I and the other volunteers drive by van to Bagamoya,
we pass carts pulled by oxen.
A woman in bright orange and brown sarong
walks like a queen,
her crown- a huge bundle of sticks aloft on her head,
her daughter- a princess beside her.
A man in shirt and tie rides his piki piki
(swahili for motorcycle)
with a woman riding side saddle behind,
her white blouse and navy skirt flapping.
A dala dala or bus,
whose name comes from the purchase of a ticket to ride,
honks at pedestrians as it flies by.
Little shops- huts of clay walls and tin roofs
crammed next to each other,
line the main thoroughfare of every village,
selling cloth with bold prints of sun flowers and giant hibiscus,
beaded jewelry, fried food, coca cola,
oil paintings and wooden sculptures.
Young men hold up bags of oranges to bus and car windows,
slowed momentarily for the series of speed bumps
or the farmer herding his goats across the road.
By the time we arrive at Bagamoya,
at this juncture of old and new,
this fishing village whose name means
“to lay down the burden of your heart”—
it has already kept its promise.
Margit Johnson
Northfield, Minnesota

The Monarch Time of Year

It’s the monarch time of year again,
when the butterflies flutter from zinnia to cosmos
to milkweed in ever greater numbers.
Their orange and black wings add
moving color to the August garden,
already brimming with the bright bossy yellows
of sunflowers, marigolds and black-eyed Susans.

These monarchs, the August monarchs, are the chosen ones.
They are the great-great-great-great grandchildren
of the butterflies who pollinated last year’s garden.
Their parents and grandparents lived
flitting and fleeting lives earlier this summer.
Only three weeks from egg to larva to pupa
to butterfly that laid more eggs.

No family stories to tell there, no photo albums.
The previous generations were too busy
just getting from here to there to survive.
Sure, there was that other chosen generation,
The ones who spent last winter in Mexico,
but they’re gone now. Their photos may still be
in tiny shoeboxes under a leaf somewhere.

This generation of monarchs, these chosen ones,
can look forward to the entire winter down south –
hanging out together in the trees in Mexico,
basking in the warm sun, gathering sweet nectar
from the bougainvillea draped luxuriously from every doorway.
The good life and a very long life in monarch time.

But good, long lives come with a price –
watching friends and family fall away and die,
weathering rough storms, losing one’s looks
as wings become tattered and worn, 
wondering if there might be other places in the world to explore, 
but not having enough time or energy. 
Even the chosen ones die, after they’ve laid their eggs in Mexico.

Come spring, their offspring start the flight northward, 
eager to start another generation, which will give birth 
to yet another generation and so on 
until the monarch time of year in the north 
is filled with orange and black butterflies, 
stocking up and preparing for their long flight south, 
wondering about their destination, 
perhaps wishing that someone before them 
had organized that photo album.
Hannah Pahs  
Northfield, Minnesota

_Layover_

According to Meyers Barker, Dane County was the best goddamn county in the entire United States of this here America. Warren had never actually liked Meyers Barker, but there was always the off chance that his dad would score big at the casino that night and next week he and Meyers Barker wouldn’t be sitting in a dingy cafeteria, but at some concert they wanted to go to.

***

“Go west,” said Mrs. Charles. “That’s where they all go, isn’t it?” Warren thought he tasted bile. There was no way in hell he was about to become part of a “they.” He threw three bottles of shampoo into his suitcase and wondered if he had enough to become someone from a math problem. _If Warren Charles travels west at 50 miles per hour for four days with three bottles of shampoo, how clean will his hair be when he reaches inevitable obscurity?_

“I’m not going west,” he said.
“Where are you going then, dear?”
“I don’t know, maybe I’ll go to Dane County.”
Warren hauled his bag over his shoulder and shut the door forcefully behind him.

***

“Doin’ okay, Warren?”
Warren considered whether his life would be monumentally changed by seeing Diane Coffee in concert.
“You know, my dad would be happy to talk with you sometime, not like a replacement or anything, but – “
Warren stood up with his tray and left. He had all the time in the world to see something better than Diane Coffee, and Meyers Barker could go to hell.

***

Admissions counselors really could spew some high-level bullshit. It took a lot of stretching to insist his gap year was about to be a transcendental journey of
self-discovery. Like a little introspection with a dollop of French cheese was some sort of fix for all the stuff he hadn’t had time for during math homework.

***

How would his obituary read? Warren Charles was a student, loved by no one else but his mother and pathetic Meyers Barker. Warren Charles contributed nothing to the world but an endless knowledge of logarithms and how to respond to questions he’d never be asked in real life. Even if he didn’t want to go to college, Warren figured he was inescapably bound by the staggering total of his achievements thus far to four years and a degree. Warren Charles never learned to play baseball or to have a good chat. Warren Charles didn’t go to the Diane Coffee concert. And damn it if leaving here wasn’t going to stop him from being defined by a list of things he didn’t do.

***

He did eventually give in and call his mother during the flight’s layover. “What do you want, really though, Warren?” She was asking.

“I told you,” he said. “I’m going to do something important.” He didn’t say something dad would’ve done or something I should’ve done before now or something to make me feel like my life isn’t a complete waste, because then the conversation would be more uncomfortable than he was bored.

Warren would’ve hung up had he not already read the entirety of the magazine rack and tried everything on the Cinnabon menu. His eyes fell on the airplane statuette sitting on the counter. “I don’t know, maybe I’ll be a pilot.” Richard Charles is survived by his son Warren, a pilot. The line went dead.

***

The bottom line was that he’d never been offered to be taught how to fly a plane; he’d been offered to be taught how to play baseball and to have a good chat. Warren wondered if he became a pilot and crashed his plane into the ground tomorrow, how many things people would regret refusing him because they’d always thought they’d have more time to say “yes, sure Warren, I’ll help you decide how much shampoo to take with you.” He was drowning in time.

***

Dane County wasn’t the best goddamn county in the entire United States of this here America, but it did have the lack of definition that reminded Warren he’d rather have known how to catch a ball than to have gotten a 34 on his
ACTs. There was no place in the entire United States of this here America that could make him forget that, but there were plenty of places he could try. He discovered that rental car shops were open for 24 hours in Dane County, and he forked over one hundred and twenty dollars without thinking.
Becky Boling
Northfield, Minnesota

*akvavit and herring*

caravans of bikes
zinged past my toes
cobblestones made me
stagger and trip

entwined circles
onion globes on circular towers
bent my neck and gave me vertigo

my eyes and stomach
soared and dipped
along with black and white magpies,
mini-gray-headed-raven-like crows
and blue herons on pencil-thin stilts

cappuccinos caffeinated
and sugared my afternoons
fjord-cooled breezes
made me shiver and take
deep deep breaths

when a northern sun reluctant
gave way to chalky night
festive Danes outside my window
serenaded my sleep

Viking ships,
Rosemary-baby prams,
like black wimpled nuns
roiled through my slumber

we gamboled past
gaderne og kirkene
to a soundtrack
of acrobatic vowels
and crashing consonants

Time to pitch maps
pack our bags
with smelly twice-worn clothes
and amid the folds
the savor of smoked herring

København
19 juni 2016
I look out the window upon the back porch.
Dust clouds the screens, chairs are stacked, huddled
Embraced against winter, protected from storms.
Each surface wears a cowl, no tracks disturb the layers of time

I check my calendar, the last meeting of the year,
The passing of the baton, next year's agenda
Already clutters my thoughts, I open the door.
Air, a dry kiss from a shy sun.

Now between this and that, before the wrangling and demands.

A world waits for me to clear the detritus of winter,
To wash the dirt and dust from pebbled glass and laminated metal.
I set the chairs to look out on a greening world
To guard tremulous buds and soft blades

Table, stool, chairs, I sit with them
In quiet, sober delight, between now and then.
Except for a distant mower, it’s quiet here in the early morning on the lake.
Off to the left there’s a fellow fishing from his pontoon boat with the little awning.
I’m imagining a canoe trip to the tiny island across the way in the small cove to the west.
You’ve been fiddling with the green and white lawn chair, maneuvering it into a patch of sunlight.
The couple on the deck near us, sitting in the morning sun, your sun, leave just as you finally settle, but are replaced by the woman in the navy sweatshirt, whom I saw when I fetched our coffee from the lodge’s lobby.
I’m watching the geese float and bob for food on the open water, their white bottoms blinking in the light.
I look again toward the little island to my left and you, writing in your notebook, to my right and marvel that, despite the distance between us, the expanse of lawn or water or thought,
I still feel the ties I yearn for, the bond between the near shore and the far.
Note to a Dying Friend
11 February 2016

Yesterday I saw a murder of crows—and, no, Barb, it did not make me think of you!

But it was a strange and awesome sight: The trees in Murphy Square, all bare now, of course, were crowned with crows. And as I walked toward Si Melby, the entire twilight sky—orange and blue—was alive with crows on wing.

And the noise—a cawing over the dome that silenced the rush-hour traffic on Riverside and the incessant hum of 94. When I turned into the alley between Kennedy and the bleachers I could see that the whole West Bank from the park to Franklin had become an omen, something Teiresias, whom I played (in Greek!) in college, would ‘read’ and prognosticate upon.

Perhaps we are being warned about Trump or climate change? Or maybe those crows we deem so murderous are just exulting in the beauty of the evening sky.

And that, Barb, made me think of you.
Dawn creeps early into our bedroom
and I rise quietly so as not to disturb
your sleep. I pour my coffee and add a bit
more water to extend the pot—glad
for that first cup extra strong. I read, pour
you a cup when you come down, fill
my water bottle, and prepare to swim.

At the pool August sunlight moves through
the clear water and blues everything. I stretch,
don goggles, and jump in. I’m floating now
between blue worlds, suspended between air
and water, sky above and aqua pool below.
I glide under air and over water, glance
the clear surface, and wonder whether life

is just such suspension—between here and there,
now and then, near and far, sky and watery earth.
As I swim, I hum the praises of my gods: Dawn
and Light and Movement. And You. I revel in the torque
of bone and muscle at shoulders and hips and knees.
I want this morning and this movement to go on and on—
want to skim, like the first rays of dawn, your shimmering world.
 You were young and mobile.
 You’d poured over the school catalogs: “A final northern outpost,” one of them proclaimed; Vancouver, British Columbia. Both British and Columbian, for reasons beyond your grasp (it was named after the river, which was named after an American ship). Happy internationals walked through streets warmed by slanted sunlight, flashing down from towers of aquamarine glass. Downtown. Happy people. Sunrays slanted in their northern-ness.

On arrival, you saw how little remained of the wild that once defined that “northern outpost.” And anyway you didn’t mind. You were done with the wild, insomuch as you’d experienced it. Isolated campgrounds in the lower Sierras where you and your buddies drank and listened to Dylan and Young like you had singularly discovered drink and political folk music.

That was the nearest wilderness to your hometown, in the northern Sacramento Valley. The Valley was defined by vast patches of rice fields broken by orchards and the river. All the whitish yellow spread out into directionless haze. The air softened at night, then grew thick with moths and mosquitoes. A warm breeze blew through the orchards and picked up the smells from them; the night world became murky with scent.

There were the peaches—you could only smell them when they were ripe, overripe, rotting on the ground. But in those weeks of perfect ripeness, just before the picking, the scent grew more intoxicating than the freshly done hair of any local girl. And you would know—you were a son of that town, after all. At the school dances you’d rested your hands on their waists still soft with youth, even the last remnants of child-fat. Sweaty, just as you were, though it didn’t feel sweaty on them. You would say it felt misty.

In that town was the smell of rivers, too. You’d grown up fly fishing with your father. And duck hunting, so throw in the sting of January rain in the pre-dawn, the sustained cold of your suctioned waders. That slow realization of the daylight becoming and the cackling of your father’s duck call in the fog.

That’s what wilderness was. But Vancouver was a city, and it was filthy with human experience. You could feel the people, feel their indifference. They weren’t impressed—they belonged here; they were the city. Without its people, it was steel and concrete and the rain falling on silence.
You became one of them, and the city was your home for a while. You fell into step with another—a girl—and the two of you buckled under the weight of it, the heavy lights along Granville that winked through the sprinkling rain, and the wind that blew the seawater sweat against the cascading rows of apartments. It was so easy to hide out there. In your apartment bedroom no one could find the two of you—you and her—and the rain drizzled on top an extra coat of sealant.

This town is small.
You ask her—your wife, now—each time she runs for groceries, “Who did you see this time?”
You’ve met the mayor; she’s nice. You attend readings at the quaint bookstore, or chase your children around at a rotation of parks. It isn’t Saint Paul with its sense of belonging to something grand—though Jesse James did draw his gun here. Fired it, too.

In Vancouver they’d busted your truck window for knockoff sunglasses and a broken camera. Later, in St. Paul, you worried about the car, even in the garage, after the neighbor’s truck was hit one night, while parked (drunk driver). Then, a month later, stolen. But the drunk had rendered it undriveable and, consequently, the thief had to abandon it a block away.

This town is small, but you like it that way. On bitter cold days the home-baked aromas of the Malt-O-Meal plant seemingly warm the air at your nostrils.

And other aromas, like coffee and Rubens, such as you could smell as you crossed the street last week, with your child. A car waited; the driver rolled down his window to say hello to a friend crossing in the opposite direction. And his friend waved to you, because she was your friend, also.

You smiled in the cold and squeezed your daughter’s tiny hand in your own. The sun, unobscured by the slight winter branches, reflected off the earthen-toned bricks and the water. So ordinary, and yet you felt you couldn’t have conjured this place if you were God.
Julie Ryan
Webster, Minnesota

Syrian Child of Conflict

Morning found you dead.

Last night you slept
in your bed
on the wrong side of the world—

where sheets of democracy
don’t yet unfurl
on your mother’s clothesline.

You got tangled up
in the winding manner of bad dreams
caused by your father’s waving banner—

woven to protect you during sleep.
Joy Riggs  
Northfield, Minnesota

Heart Strings

When our kids were 13, 11, and 9, we took them to Iowa for the funeral of my husband’s 94-year-old grandmother, Mary. The kids had attended at least one funeral before—the one for Mary’s husband, Lewis—but that had been eight years earlier. This time, they were old enough to understand the significance of the occasion.

We saw lots of cousins, aunts, and uncles at the funeral, and it seemed strange not to see Mary sitting in her usual pew, wearing an elegant dress, her curly gray hair neatly styled. After the service we went to the cemetery. It was an overcast March day, and as Steve carefully guided the kids over the slushy ground to the grave, he pointed out nearby gravestones and whispered explanations for names he recognized. His ancestors had lived in the county since before the Civil War; his three-greats grandfather had moved to Iowa after emigrating from Ireland.

As a college student, Steve had had the foresight to interview his grandparents about their experiences growing up in rural central Iowa. Although they were both gone now, their words would stay with us; he had recorded the conversations on cassette tapes and had recently converted them to a CD.

When we returned to the car, Sebastian, the middle child, said: “Mom, now I know why you pursue your family history so urgently. When I went into the cemetery and saw all the Lawlers, I thought, ‘my history is here.’”

My eyes, already red from weeping, filled up again. I gave him a hug.

“You’re a cool kid, Sebastian.”

It made me proud to know that he was learning a lesson some people didn’t learn until their 40s or 50s, if ever: Understanding where you came from helps you understand who you are.
Two weeks later, we traveled to my hometown in central Minnesota to visit my parents. On our last morning there, I asked my dad if I could see the heirloom violin he had inherited from his dad.

Dad brought the case into the family room, where the kids were watching TV. He unfastened the metal clasps and lifted the lid; inside was the violin that once belonged to my great-great-grandfather, Jasper. I leaned in for a closer look. It was like opening a musical time capsule; the case contained the violin, the bow, a shoulder rest, a jar of rosin made in Paris, a lavender silk handkerchief with an embroidered letter R, and a tiny key in a little yellowed envelope.

Dad and I looked at each other and smiled. The German-made violin dated back to 1796. It had first belonged to the brother of my three-greats-grandfather, and he decided late in his life to give it to his 10-year-old nephew.

I tried to imagine Jasper’s delight in receiving such a gift. He was the second-youngest of eleven children and likely had few possessions of his own. Did he hurriedly finish his daily chores so he could practice over and over until his calloused fingers danced lightly over the strings? It made me happy to picture this image of boyhood innocence, knowing what hell was in store for him when he left the Illinois farm at age 19 to fight for the Union.

Dad had never studied violin. I hadn’t, either, but now I wished I had taken lessons. I tentatively plucked one string. I was afraid it might crumble into dust, but it felt sturdy under the pressure.

“Sebastian, can you come here?” I asked.

I gently handed him the violin and the bow. He was the only one who knew what to do with them; he played the viola.

“Can I take a photo of you with Jasper’s violin?” I asked.

“Sure!” he said.

He nestled it under his chin and held the neck in his left hand, then grasped the bow in his right hand and held it up as though he was going to play. I looked at him and realized that he was nearly the same age Jasper was when he received the violin. The connection to those who came before me had never seemed more real.
As a young father, Jasper had played this instrument on the Kansas prairie, like Pa Ingalls, and it had crisscrossed the Midwest for more than 200 years as our country expanded, before coming to rest in the hands of my son.

My history was here. I could touch it with my fingers and feel it in my heart.
Leslie Schultz
Northfield, Minnesota

Berry Fields in Snow

Rusted leaves flutter still, here and there, like flags planted on arctic escarpments at huge cost. Rarely, a scrap of jewel-bright strawberry smolders, sooty ruby, above the sparkle of new snow.

Across the road, asparagus has gone to seed, taller than ostriches, with nodding plumage waving red-orange berries, like beaded fans; and lean raspberry canes, tougher than a miser’s heart, arc and crash over snow drifts.

Really, Hokusai should be here with his paints, or Basho with his pointed, bamboo brush.
Christine Kallman  
Northfield, Minnesota

_Bison_

From our lookout on the road above  
he’s slight, a peaceful fellow  
gently curled on prairie sod. We drive  
on down. These lands are called Bad

but we’ve seen more of Good:  
hawk, magpie, bluebird, tall grass,  
yucca. Striated rock of yellow, purple,  
red, gray, laid across ten million patient years,

set hard. Dissolved by mindless streams  
with no intent of altering the world,  
still this craggy rockscape manifests their work.  
We stop the car. I inch the window down.

An eye unblinking in a wall of brown. Mountain  
of fur and flesh evolved to hoist a ton and ram  
any life form in its way. Why this? Why here?  
Because it can live here, they say. Antelope,

yellow clover, quivering prairie dog. My fretful middle-aged self,  
my patient husband, our offspring chomping tuna sandwiches  
and slurping cartoned cows’ milk with the recklessness  
of the food chain pinnacle. And the latest murderer

who haunts us through the news on our car radio, whose terror  
hunts us down and seizes us in this wild place somewhere east  
of silent stony faces. All these exist because they can.  
The beast rises, heaves to standing, sculpted

to prophet’s doomsday only better, wilder. Wide flat hooves,  
staunch thighs, meat to meat at haunches planted, back immense  
ascending to the hairy, horned, molded, molting, oh the mass of head!  
Far bigger than one side of a nickel!
Others leave their cars, approach. Not me—
his fickle nature more than I can bear,
the only seeming purpose here the sun, the wind
that wear things down.