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The Day I Did Winnie Cooper Wrong

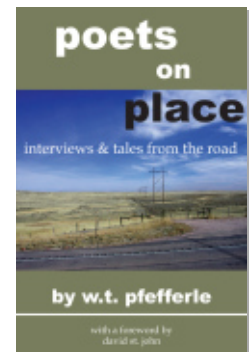
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The Day I Did Winnie Cooper Wrong

The crunch was loud and thick. I looked at my wife and asked her if she had any ideas. I thought maybe a small deck chair we hadn't stowed properly. Maybe fifty tin cans.

We had just finished packing Winnie Cooper full after a lovely week on the Oregon coast. We had driven down from Washington and rented this house as a treat to ourselves for my wife's birthday. But now the schedule called to us, and the weather had started to turn. The rain, which had been spotty all morning, had now started to come down steadily. A light wind was coming off the ocean. But the view was clear. We had finished cleaning the house, had put the keys back in the lockbox, and we were headed out of the driveway when I heard the crunch.

When I got out, I saw the problem. I had driven the motor home into the roof overhang. A long board under the gutter had been torn off, about nine inches of it lying on the driveway.

The house didn't look too bad. I was grateful I didn't tear the metal gutters down. It would be an easy repair. A shitty break, but not the end of the world.

On the other hand, as I struggled to pull myself up Winnie's ladder, I kept thinking: "Please, God, I know I'm a sinner, a dirty-dog sinner. I know all about the gigantic catalog of mistakes I've made, the miserable gifts I bring to this sunny world. But this time—this one time—show me a little blinding mercy. Please don't let there be a tear in the fiberglass."

And, of course, there was. I could see through a foot-long gash right down inside the coach—I'm not making this up—to the Styrofoam insulation of the drop ceiling. Now the rain was coming down in sheets. The wind picked up and howled in my ears. I stood there on the ladder, twelve terrifying feet above earth, and wished with all of my strength for a lightning bolt.

My wife and I left a contrite note for the house owner and got rolling. The storm was swamping the entire coast for a hundred miles north and south. We just started driving on U.S. 101. My wife opened up the big RV guide, looking for a place in the area where we might find cover. She burned up the cell phone while I drove through the deluge. We finally located a place ninety miles north. It was Sunday afternoon. In

this part of the state—sleepy little oceanside towns—most businesses are closed on Sundays. The streets roll up. The gas stations close at 6:00 p.m. The voice on the phone told us to come his way. Their service bays were closed till the next morning; but they had a big awning, and I could park there if I wanted.

The rain kept up, but now the wind was behind us. My wife kept checking the ceiling in the back, and the water kept coming in. She hadn't yet said a cross word. She knows me. She knew that I was beating myself up in exquisite ways, interesting ways, varied ways, ways that could not compare.

By the time it was dark, we had pulled Winnie out of the storm. We parked her and emptied out boxes of everything that was soaked. We put our clothes in garbage bags and then stood in the dark waiting for a cabdriver to come and deliver us to the nearest Holiday Inn. Once there, we arranged for another man to bring us some large pizzas. And then we slept.



Barbara Drake

Yamhill, Oregon

Barbara Drake lives on a vineyard amidst the rolling foothills of far western Oregon, surrounded by fields covered with hazelnut and walnut trees. Her land is crowded with sheep, chickens, one big rooster, and Guy, a large and happy border collie.

She and I walk through the farmhouse, surrounded by the smell of scones and hot coffee. She shows me the floors and ceilings that her husband Bill did himself. "They're soft wood," Barbara tells me. "The dog marks them up."

We sit in her sunroom as the Saturday morning light floods in.

We talk about her recent chapbook, Small Favors, a gorgeous limited-edition offering full of earthy poetry, all of it rooted in place and the natural world. Barbara tells me about an old guy who showed up at the farm one day, a guy who had lived on this land almost eighty years ago. He remembered it as the place where he was happiest. They struck up some correspondence, and he sent her a photo of the place from the '20s that showed some of the same trees that are there today. Barbara likes living here a lot, and much of the reason for that is because she knows the history, feels the history of the place. She knows that the spirit of the place is something that existed before her, and she hopes it continues long after.

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*How did you end up in Oregon?*

I grew up in Oregon. Though I was born in Kansas, we left when I was young. And I went to college out here, then lived in Michigan for sixteen years, then moved back. Even when I was in the Midwest, I often wrote about the West. And I drove out here in the summers. I bought a piece of land on the southern Oregon coast, so there'd be a place for the family. I just feel like I belong out here. Maybe it's an imprinting from my parents, who came from Kansas when they were very young. When my father met my mother, he promised her that when they married he'd take her to Oregon to live. So it's part of the family mythology that wherever you go, you return to the beautiful West.

*In the time I've been traveling out here, talking to poets, I get the very real sense that the West is this really tangible thing, a place, an attitude, a way of living.*

I think it's very physical. I love the landscape. Everywhere I look there are sights that please my eye. It's a physical, visual kind of thing, the way the land rolls, the trees, the mountains on the horizon. I feel like I'm at home so I feel comfortable. I also know about the past, the history of the place, so I have a connection in time to the area, which feels very familiar. I like being someplace where I know what it was like in 1945, 1953, 1962, and so on. I can write out of that with confidence about the beauty, and the history, and the people. It's as if being here, or looking at the world from the point of view of a westerner, even when I'm not actually here, I'm rooted in some way that puts me in touch with other dimensions of time and space as they are expressed or channeled through the touch point of place. I'm not being mystical. I just mean that my sense of being in the world and in the flow of history—and my understanding of that world and that history—is stronger because I know where home is in a very real way.

*Are there particular elements of the natural world that show up more frequently in your poetry because you live where you do?*

Landscape, events that happen here, the animals, and the weather of the place all get into my poetry, so I guess the answer is yes. I published a book of personal essays that have to do with the first ten years on this farm. I grew up on the Oregon coast, so I always felt a great attachment for the coast or the beach, and that's where I go to get away. But later on I also discovered the eastern side of the Cascades, and I've written some poems about that.

The variety in the state is just wonderful. I include landscape, birds, plants, local history, and so on, in my poetry. Because the landscape of the West is so rich and varied, I feel it's always opening up, not repetitious. The process of writing requires living with awareness in this world. Being mindful. Both familiarity and change can make that happen. But wherever I go, western Oregon is the place I come back to.

*How did the move from a city to a rural farm and vineyard change your work?*

In Portland we lived in a great house in a busy and interesting city neighborhood, and I loved that. I used to think that I could never live anywhere but Portland, but now that I'm out here I feel that the space and natural beauty around are more important, and if we want to go into the city, it's only an hour's drive. I think I used to write more about popular-culture subjects and urban subjects, about people and encounters in the city; and now I draw from the natural landscape. It's what I engage with all the time. It's there as a subject, and it's there as a sort of a quietness. I feel that there's peacefulness here. In

my new chapbook of poems, there are poems about the physical place, the animals, and so on. But there are other ones that are about the spirits of the place. That's sort of hard to explain without sounding too metaphysical. But I definitely feel the current of all the lives and so on that have come through this place.

Of course, when I write out of the western viewpoint, I hope people will understand that I'm not just writing about my own little corner of the world. I'm trying to express the big, difficult stuff through a particular familiar place.

I'm always grateful to people who have done something good, who have left something beautiful or useful in the world. It can be something as common as old fruit trees. What if someone hadn't taken the trouble to plant those trees? People need to leave something good behind, rather than screwing up the world. I worry about that. I have three children of my own and five stepchildren, and together Bill and I have ten young grandchildren. I want the world to be good for them. I don't want anyone's children of the future to say, "If only our ancestors had quit making war, quit polluting, hadn't been so short-sighted." I want them to say, "Weren't they smart to have left a good world for us."

Writing is part of that, too. You write your poems and enter into the ongoing dialogue, maybe leave something to speak for the place when you're gone.

*from* The Man from the Past Visits the Present

The man who comes up the road  
is tall and thin and elderly, white-haired  
with glasses, doesn't look anything like  
the boy he says he was when he lived here  
on our farm, eighty years ago.

Wanting to draw the missing figures  
in my picture of this landscape,  
I ask him about the house, the well, the trees.  
He says he has never loved  
any other place so well as this one.

He remembers Sunday picnics,  
the community of Bohemian farmers  
who came together on Sundays  
to play their mandolins, eat from picnic baskets.  
He remembers picking almonds from trees—  
is it possible these spindly old trees  
bringing forth eight or ten nuts each year  
are those? In photos he shows me, I see  
the familiar contour of our mountain,  
much older than almond trees or any  
growing thing on the place. And there  
are the Bohemians, the family and friends,  
men in straw hats and suits sitting on the hill  
where the vineyard is now, once an orchard  
of peaches, plums. Their musical  
instruments are cocked across their laps.  
The women wear dresses down to their ankles.

We have a lot in common, this man and I,  
knowing how hard the ground is here, how dry  
and ungiving except for Oregon white oaks,  
the savannah grasses, the wild rose, poison oak  
snowberries.

—*Barbara Drake*



# Floyd Skloot

## Amity, Oregon

*Although the motor home is still being repaired, the trip must continue. I have one more poet to see in Oregon, the gifted and inspiring Floyd Skloot. Floyd and his wife live in an unexpected and round home on twenty acres, due east of Amity, a tiny burg with one gas station and one feed store.*

*I twist and turn up a hilly road through farm and ranchland (and vineyards), and turn down Skloot's driveway. Heavy stands of trees crowd in, providing a lovely green canopy as I travel the quarter mile to the house. I park and then stand and stare into a long, beautiful valley that sweeps away from me. I spot Floyd through one of the large windows, and I head inside.*

*We talk on the first floor of the house in a dark, small office with a window that opens into a heavily wooded area. Often during the conversation Floyd points outside at the view. He's not pointing to a scene in particular; he's simply referencing what is apparent: this place is beautiful. It's a peaceful place, dead quiet, and richly arrayed by nature.*

*In 1988, Skloot entered a terrifying and confusing new world after a virus caused permanent brain damage. He reclaimed the ability to read, speak, and write, and now lives with the damage, noting things on slips of paper that he knows his damaged brain might lose the next day. (The remarkable story of his illness is in the award-winning memoir, *In the Shadow of Memory*.)*

*During my visit, Skloot is charming, funny, insightful, and he energetically talks about his work. His illness limits the hours he can work effectively. So the work comes out more slowly. But it matches the pace of the life here. He motions out the window again.*

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What role has place played in your poetry?

I think that place is at the heart of my project as a writer. Especially since I moved here. For me it's become a way of accommodating myself to the world that I'm in and of having a relationship with the world. This place permeates all of my work. And it's also forced me to look back on where I came from, a place on the absolute opposite end of this spectrum, not only the East Coast as opposed to the West, but one

of the densest, most urban places you can come from—Brooklyn, New York. I think there were more people in the apartment building where I grew up than there are in this town.

Growing up in Brooklyn, we didn't pay attention to birds, to flowers, to trees. A bird was a bird. A tree was a tree. I've read that in Yiddish all birds are called the same thing. There's no reason to specify which kind of bird. I grew up in that mindset. This has forced me to look very closely at the distinctions between these things that I had never paid attention to. To understand different species and different forms of life.

More perhaps in my prose, in my collection of essays about living with brain damage, I have explored the experience of deciding to live in the country and abandon the city. I thought I needed the city as a lifeline. I thought I needed to be near the doctor, near the bookstore, near the theater. Within walking distance of everything. I thought I had to be in the middle of the city where my friends could see me, where I'd be in the middle of life. And in fact, what I needed to manage my illness was to get away from all of that, where there was nothing to do, where there was nothing to distract. I wasn't fast paced and hectic and filled with things to do. So my prose particularly explores that experience of place, coming to recognize the potential of place as a healing entity.

Living where I do and the way I do, I have time. My health is such that my writing time is very limited. But in this place I can write when it feels right. There is no sense of time flying by. There is no hectic pace of commitments. There is little to impinge upon the things I need to do to stay in balance and maintain my health. I've had to learn how to adjust, take my time with my work, slow down with my work. Not rush to finish. Not rush to publish. Because I can't anymore; I'm not well enough. And trying to work that way only chokes off the creative work rather than enhancing it. So I've found it very compatible to be a writer in this place.

I live disconnected from the academic publishing world and academic life. At first I worried what that would do to my "career." As it turns out, it's been a blessing. I don't have to deal with those sorts of issues. I don't have to write under pressure. My work has finally reached a large audience with my memoir, despite the disadvantages of living far away from the center of activity. Which goes to show that it will find its way there. That you don't have to be in New York. It isn't as much about connections as I thought. It's about getting the work done.

A lot of work details events and places from your childhood in Brooklyn. You wrote these poems later, obviously. How did those places from your past turn into poems?

I think my experience growing up there was very intense and vivid, given the dynamics my family had, so the details always remained in

place. The city and the family dynamics became good metaphors for me. To talk about the hardness and closedness and pressure that my parents created, being so hostile to each other. The sort of fury they created in the confined setting of an apartment building seemed to me to be an apt metaphor for the confined family and hostility that developed there, the explosions of violence that developed there that I wrote about in *Music Appreciation*. We moved from Brooklyn when I was ten, to Long Beach, a little barrier island off the south shore of Long Island. It was such a radical change of setting. I found that very dramatic. It became natural to write about that place, too, because the island was so different and so vivid. The storms and hurricanes that came with living on a barrier island became rich metaphors again. You can transplant the family, and maybe the setting is different—being closed into a little apartment or walking along the beach in the eye of the hurricane. They were all apt metaphors for what it was like to grow up in that family. So I was given, in a sense, places rich with meaning for the kind of experience I had.

Because of your medical problems and the permanent damage to your brain, do you ever think of your illness as a place, and with perspective do you think you can write about it as if it were a tangible, physical place?

It's a very chaotic place because of the damage to my brain caused by this virus. My experience is quite fragmented. My system of memory is fragmented. Abstract reasoning as well. To be inside my sick self is to be in a place which refuses to cohere and take shape. I find that to be both a place of great richness and also very scary. It helps to find organizational metaphors in the place where I live. To me, the match with the city was too close. There was no contrast between my chaotic, fragmented inner experience and the outer urban experience. There was nothing to help me get a form until I came to the country.

A Warming Trend

After three days of June rain
we kneel at our window
to watch hoary bats swoop
among the hemlock and fir.

In half-moon light, the right
music would be a fugue
for wind and erratic strings.

But all we hear is dripping eaves
and a gentle tap of moths
against the windowpanes.

We doused the lights,
but as long as our windows
hold the false moon
moths will flock to it.

Our shoulders barely touch
as a bat flies west to east.
Through my skin and bones
I can feel you breathe.

—*Floyd Skloot*