

On The Ocean Side
South Coast, Mendocino
by
Judith Tannenbaum

DOUGHERTY DESIGNS, Box 70, Elk, CA 95432;

MIGRATIONS, by Sarah Flowers, Blacksmith Press, Box 891, Fort Bragg, CA 95437;

BUFFALO FIVE, by Kiva, manuscript;

DRIFTWOOD SHORES, by Myrna Scott, Spindrift Press, Box 336, Albion, CA

Poetry is not only what is written in the poetry capitals of the world. Everywhere people write down words in an attempt to celebrate, mourn or simply notice their own lives and what lies beyond their small spheres. In his introduction to the 1979 volume, *The Western Edge: Thirty-Three Poets*, Duane BigEagle writes, “There are ninety-four poets on the ocean side of the Coastal Range from Gualala to Westport, and perhaps twice that many in all of Mendocino County.” I’m not sure how BigEagle reached this tally, but certainly of the 71,000 people who live on this particular 3,500 square miles of land, many write poems.

In her introduction to *The Western Edge*, Sharon Doubiago calls the poets of Mendocino a “community of individuals.” Mendocino, the poetry center “on the ocean side of the Coastal Range,” although still a village, is large enough to speak of as a community in this way. The town has had a reading series for years; there’ve been visiting poets, books, magazines and anthologies published, weekly poetry programs on the radio, places to gather and talk.

However, moving south, twenty miles down coast to Elk, another twenty to Point Arena and ten more south to Anchor Bay, the “individual” in Doubiago’s equation assumes a different relationship to “community.” These towns are smaller, more cut off – literally cut off a few times most winters when rain and high tides cause the water to rise over the Garcia River flats, and there’s no driving north past Point Arena.

Wherever we live, we live in that place, conscious or not of its particular qualities. Someone living and writing between the Navarro and Gualala rivers has this to pay attention to:

Highway One is the only road that runs through the towns. Anchor Bay’s a half-block long, and Elk is a bit larger, not much. The population sign in Point Arena, the big town, reads four hundred.

There’s a movie Friday nights in Elk. This same movie’s shown in Point Arena on Wednesdays. A second movie plays the theater in Point Arena over the week-end. There’s some theater, some music. There are events at the schools. There are bars, and there are dances.

The Pomo Indians lived here and still do, mostly on a rancheria between Point Arena and Manchester and to the south, on the Kashia Reservation, near Stewart’s Point.

This is logging country with a large infusion of back-to-the landers from the late 60s and early 70s. The area is now in transition towards a still unclear future. Tourism? Retirement and second-home communities? Off-shore oil drilling, thanks to Hodel?

For the most part, people who live here choose this life, prefer isolation and space to what cities offer. In general, there's a distrust of outside authority, of being told what you can do on your land, in your life.

There are the alder and willow that grow near the rivers; lupine and pine on the coast. There are mushrooms in fall, whales soon after, new lambs on the hills by mid-winter. There are redwoods and the way light filters through them, doug fir, some madrone. There are scars caused by logging, dead deer on the highway. And there's always the fog and the wind and the rain.

Talk of the weather here is not superficial. Rain, for example, is the primary reality for a number of months. Sixty inches is the yearly average. And then there's the wind. So when a poet who lives here writes, "...only winter/is as wild as my heart" (Scott), this is not mere pretty language, but words that summon the sight of fallen limbs blocking dirt road, the sound of the surf in a storm, the memory of that January the pier and the boathouse were ripped from the wharf.

Many of the poems written here in southern Mendocino county share with haiku the season words, the cherry blossoms or *uguisu* that mean spring to a Japanese reader. Here the words are amaryllis, woodsmoke, dry grasses. These words, and others like them, can seem too easy, just quaint, to a reader for whom they are mostly sounds or a picture vaguely imagined. But to someone who looks out at dry grasses at the end of summer, worrying about fire, knowing it's time to get wood for winter, to conserve on the water, to take one more hike up the river, these words send shoots of meaning that are precise and full of texture.

These poems share also with haiku the intention of being specific – rain doesn't fall on a meadow, but on Roth's meadow (Dougherty) – and accurately observed – "...the Elk beach/where the Greenwood Creek runs/in three channels to the sea" (Kiva). And as a haiku's precisely noted specific opens wide vistas in a reader's mind and heart, so too with these poems:

...There are tide rows of deserted shells
sandstone walls
covered with red algae.
I stand looking north
cold on my face
a buoy wails above the reef
on my lips weightless humming.

- Sarah Flowers

Kate Dougherty, Kiva, Myrna Scott and Sarah Flowers live and write, here, in this particular place. Kate Dougherty lives in Elk; Kiva's homestead is about three miles out of town. Myrna Scott's house is just up the hill from Point Arena, and Sarah Flowers lives in the cabin she built on eighty acres between Point Arena and Anchor Bay.

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VESPERS

Mrs. Berry came across my yard

cupping her hand in front of her apron.
Cookies, I thought? But, no
did I know about birds like my son
she knew he was gone, had I heard from him
and look, the smallest egg
mottled gray-green, now what do you suppose
it could be? He's the one to ask
I told her. So, we had to guess,
most likely a hummingbird –
being so small...

I see the swallows are back.
Yes, she smiles tracing the song
to the wire, yes
they say that for every one
that nests in your house
there is a blessing.

She left without knowing what the egg was.
Could have been a miracle, I thought
later, watching a blessing glide
in the golden light, cavort
over my picket fence
and swoop around the iris,
working its best
eating the last bugs
out of someone's Thursday.

- Kate Dougherty

I first read the distinction between network and community in the writing of Robert Bly. Your network, he wrote, is the people scattered all over the world who share your concerns. Your community is the people who live around you, each one caught up with his own concerns. Kate Dougherty's Elk poems focus on her community. In these she tries "...not to catch it.../just describe it..." to convey "Mel Matson as Mel Matson."

The concept of network is also important to Dougherty, in her poems and in the work she does to share poetry. In addition to writing poems, Dougherty does fine print editions of the poems of others. Her first printing was done with Mark Morton, teacher at Greenwood School, the public elementary school in Elk. Using a Chandler & Price, Morton and Dougherty taught first through fifth graders to print. Together these adults and the kids produced letterpress books of the students' poems and stories.

Dougherty began Dougherty Designs in 1981 with the Limited Edition Poetry Series, a series of poetry cards. In 1983, Dougherty printed William Matthews's *Good* and in 1984, *Riding The Back of the Earth*, a book of poems by Christine Dumaine. In 1985, Dougherty printed a broadside of Elk poet Don Shanley's "Faith in the Apple." Her most recent project is a 60-run edition of Czeslaw Milosz's "Song On Porcelain," printed in the original Polish and in Milosz's and Robert Pinsky's English translation, and signed by both poets.

For Dougherty, poems are a gift, a gift to be shaped with gratitude for and knowledge of poetry's power.

TALISMAN

She moved through the room as in a ceremonial
solemn, reserved, proud. Then she smiled –
there was a gap in that smile!
She placed her tooth in my hand
and we looked down. Young kernel
of ivory corn, hollow, with blood
her own. But it has been lost again,
it is dark, we still can't find it.
She's in the other room writing a poem.

Daughter, Angel...oh my sad first grader,
it's more than the wish, I remember –
to slide your hand under the pillow
and feel that coin
is to know something larger than real
winks back at you.
First Messenger, Dear Fairy,
take our poems, her wish, leave
your silver.

- Kate Dougherty

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from A TRIBUTE TO AFTERNOON

...I vowed to my ancestors to love the
earth back into living, to feed the afternoons from my own
mouth, to use my last breath to blow wind through the dry
grass. Afternoon of the past crowd around me, demanding to
know where I've been. I whisper how I've been locked away so
long, I shatter like glass. They share with me a true story.
I cut one lock of my hair and give them, memory.

- Kiva

The poems in Kiva's manuscript, *Buffalo Five*, all speak with an "I," but the voice
of this I is not only this woman's. The voice is large, sure and steady, nearly mythical.
And the passions and vows this voice speaks of are also large:

With these words
I redeem the human body.
I claim this blood,
this womb,
and bear it witness.

This voice speaks of Elk:

Well you see
the toilet
is a chair
out there
under the redwood trees,
dripping dew

and the flies
yes the worms do
crawl around there,
but it's cool
and the air smells
of sweet fern

and of the area around Mt. Shasta where Kiva grew up:

...By now Mt. Lassen might have snow,
the streams could be full and running, the air so
crisp, the leaves of aspens – the color of earth
and wheat...”

But Kiva's poems are never only description. The demand made by the gift of memory is not nostalgic, personal or simple. The demand is to enter fully into the wilds that surround daily life, to be alert there, and to come back with words.

BUFFALO FIVE, 1

It was one of those five line poems.
The title was *Buffalo Five*.
It was a good poem.
I woke up,
trying to remember
the last two lines,
some sort of message.
I thought I wrote it down
but now I struggle along knowing
that someone's poem is lost.
I have the title, *Buffalo Five*.
There were five lines.
The message was old.
It was a song heard deep,
moving across the plains.
I know that to get that message,
I would have to go on sleeping,
or take mushrooms,
or sweat,
in that house
that keeps collapsing,
the one that heard
Melvin Chiloquin murmur,
“Pitiful, just pitiful.”

- Kiva



THE FLOW OF SALT

the sea reaches out to me
as a mother to a child.
there is kinship between blood and brine.

I carried the moon in my womb half a lifetime
and the moon carries the tides.
something strong within my soul
remembers when I was a fish,
and the rhythm of my heart is the rhythm of the sea.
- Myrna Scott

Most of the poems in Scott's collection, *Driftwood Shores*, are lyrics, but she also loves the haiku form, and all her work has qualities of the haiku. There is the way she understands her place in the world, "let me be so free/that I am chained by a fawn,/shackled by a cloud or a stone," and also that slightly sad-tinged recognition of the solitary essence of this human place:

lone moon
lone body
many craters and selves

Moved by Issa's *The Year of My Life*, Scott has been working on an American haibun and she often catches that Issa-like laugh:

strong north wind
haggling with my hat
over where my hair should be

Scott's life, like Issa's, has known much pain. Also like Issa, Scott writes poems that accept this pain as part of being.

light rain touching my face
cane in one hand, milk in the other
I come up the hill, free from the sofa

BIRTHDAY PARTY

do not bring me rejuvenating
mineral water or teas,
do not bring me creams
ointments, hair dyes
or exercise contraptions.
let me have my flabby belly,
it has known girdles, pregnancies
paralysis, four operations
and endless pain.
let me have the lines in my face
deepening, as a winter night,
some of sadness, some of joy
a miniature of my soul,
half a century
reaching out, accumulating.
let me have my gray hairs
each one marking a sleepless night
a lost poem, a dead dream.
let me have my unsparkling eyes

they have seen most
of the contradictions,
love hate, seas deserts
happiness sorrow, mountains plains
sex celibacy, birth death.
let me have my bent shoulders
and the hidden tears they carry,
they have endured too much
of poverty, persecution
injustice and madness.
let me have my slow walk,
like a small mountain stream
I was once running young.
once is enough.
let me feel life's salt,
old as the sea.

- Myrna Scott



THE BROKEN BOND

A red-tailed's cries
pierce the sound of water.
It lights on top of a snag
Balancing, wings out stretched
above the creek which courses deeper
into a ravine of its own making.
An alder growing on the bank
grasps less and less ground.
Within the grip of tangled roots
is cushioned sand
where a bird lies on its side
dead for several days.
A large hawk with wings
the color of tree limbs
the feathers webbed in a soft brown pile
that stirs
leaves in an autumn wind.
Its talons hold to emptiness
and on the white bibbed chest
a bullet hole.
*Mates for life reduced to one
Above the death I circle screaming.*
- Sarah Flowers

Sarah Flowers has lived in the country most of her life. She is one of the people remaining in the United States trying to survive economically through intelligent and caring use of a small piece of land. Such use demands what her senses notice. Her book, *Migrations* (beautifully printed by Felicia Rice of Moving Parts Press) is filled with exact beauty: "cobwebs make a warp for the wind," "Along the backroads/where wind flings its wild body," "a raven lifting on the up draft/strums the sky with gloved fingers."

HOMELAND

In the meadow that was cleared for grain
where redwoods once grew three to an acre.
There where raccoons defecated seeds
into massive burned stumps
and where huckleberries grow
from the blackened ruins
the world is beyond grass and dandelions.
Wind speaks of it in the tops of perimeter firs
and woodpeckers counsel.

Through tall grass sheep trails wind
unused for many months.
Their unhealed wounds record the past
the purpose of land changing
from hand to hand.
While dragonflies hang suspended
my body imprints the meadow one last time.
Nearby a sheep's skull lies half buried under duff.
In leaving I carry it with me
for only I know its name.

- Sarah Flowers

MENDOCINO COUNTY PUBLICATIONS WHICH INCLUDE POETRY:

***Arts & Entertainment*, P.O. Box 765, Mendocino, CA 95460**

***Big River News*, Box 169, Mendocino, CA 95460**

***Mendocino Commentary*, Box 1222, Fort Bragg, CA 95437**

***Ridge Review*, Box 90, Mendocino, CA 95460**

***The Western Edge: Thirty Three Poets*, Ten Mile River Press, 32000 North Highway One, Fort Bragg, CA 95437**

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(Poetry Flash, Number 156, March 1986)