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**A Return to the Poetry  
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◆ I placed Joseph Caldwell's poems first, in the first anthology of lawyers' poetry (2004), and I did it because his poems are so perfectly evocative of the "place" the poet inhabits (we might want to say this state, this West Virginia).

Here is a Caldwell poem which I particularly like, this one, not so much because it speaks directly to the particulars of West Virginia, as does "Buffalo Creek" (p. 21), "Out-Migration" (p. 22), "Cabin Creek, Near Ohley" (p. 23), "School Boy on Harts Creek" (p. 24), or "Paint Creek" (p. 26), but for still another reason:

**Kanawha Trail**

November's morning sun uncovers  
frost covered spider webs  
criss crossing the trail.  
A purple sweet gum angles  
over bruised mushrooms  
before fading  
to a surface grave.  
Hemlock roots grasp  
cantilevered rocks.  
Shadows interlock trees  
becoming undone  
and I trudge along  
oblivious to myself.

[p. 25]

Caldwell's "Kanawha Trail" reminds me of Warren Woessner's "November," where the narrator's observation result not in a felt-sense of obliviousness, but a vague sense of alone-ness. Here is Woessner's

"November":

## November

Perfect gray day  
leaves dead or dull green.  
Today I go where I want,  
fit in,  
push through the tall weeds in my old coat  
not hurting a thing.  
Most birds long gone--  
mosquitoes frozen out.  
Down the creek, one muskrat  
hunts for food under a fallen box elder.  
I stand on the bank  
content but lonely,  
no friend along, no way  
to celebrate the good news.

[p. 61]

Let me go back to Caldwell's "Kanawha Trail" and what I find attractive about the poem. In "Kanawha Trail" we see a poet doing what we expect poets to do—observe carefully. We're all surrounded by the "natural" world; but in the day-to-day affairs of life, we lose the immediate presence of this world—until we again seek it out, or have it pointed out to us.<sup>1</sup> Caldwell, in "Kanawha Trail" does some pointing for me; he provides a reminder of what it is in the world that I did not today try to see. The poet, Caldwell, is a seer, an

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Taylor, in "Letter to David Orr" thanks Orr for showing him something like what Joseph Caldwell shows the reader. Taylor says:

Than you for showing me  
the cane today,  
the tall patch near Goose Creek  
a parking lot will cover soon.

[p. 34]

observer; I become an observer by way of the poem and the poet.

The other thing I like about this wonderful simple poem is that the poet makes something of a surprise appearance at the end of the poem (as if he could have actually absented himself). As the poet records his observations of what can be seen along the Kanawha Trail, as he "trudge[s] along," he realizes that he has become "oblivious to himself." Yet, there's an irony here—becoming conscious of the feeling of obliviousness that in it become known to consciousness obliterates it.

The sudden, surprising, and delightful appearance of the poet (narrator) at the end of "Kanahwa Trail" reminds me of Robert Bly's versions of Kabir's ecstatic poems. I once heard Bly recite the following Kabir poem, where Kabir puts in a personal appearance at the end of the poem:

Inside this clay jug there there are canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!

All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars.

The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels.

And the music from the strings no one touches, and the source of all water.

If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:  
Friend, listen: the God whom I love is inside.

Here is another Kabir poem, again a Bly translation:

I laugh when I hear that the fish in the water is thirsty.

You don't grasp the fact that what is most alive of all is inside your own house;

and so you walk from one holy city to the next with a  
confused look!

Kabir will tell you the truth: go wherever you like, to  
Calcutta or Tibet:

if you can't find where your soul is hidden,

for you the world will never be real!

[Robert Bly, *The Kabir Book* 6, 9 (Boston: Beacon Press,  
1977)][Sometimes the poet tells us that we can't be told  
exactly what the "lesson" is to be drawn from the poem.  
Consider Warren Woessner's "Hard Winter":

### **Hard Winter**

Walking the lines I found a rabbit  
caught in the slats of a snow fence—  
wide-eyed, dead.

No marks.

Whatever it ran from

missed. Snow

gave it a decent burial.

Wind dug it up again.

I pulled the stiff body free,

still frozen in flight,

and lay it on the ground.

My gloves were covered with fur.

If there was a lesson

I left it there,

got back to my fire.][p. 51]

Reading Caldwell's poetry, one begins to see that the  
poet's appearance (Caldwell's appearance) at the end of  
the poem is a regular feature to be found in his poetry.  
Here are two of Caldwell's poems, "Firewatch / Kate's  
Mountain" and "Contact" in which Caldwell makes the same  
move:

### **Firewatch**

### **Kate's Mountain**

Ridges unfold, stepping away  
into plateaus  
wrinkled by ancient streams.  
Tin barn roofs  
shine like broken mirrors  
scattered across the valley.  
Then winds advance,  
clouds compress  
into surging waves  
breaking over the crest.  
Listening to steady rain,  
I make plans.

### **Contact**

Dawn at the high meadow farm  
finds the sun supported by wild flowers  
erect before the first morning breeze.  
Dew perspires on split-rail posts.  
Sheep walk around limestone outcroppings  
to drink at the blue sulphur spring.  
The meadow undulates like a wave,  
sinkhole troughs surrounded by  
swells of pink clover.  
I am nearer when I am here.

[pp. 27 & 29]

And when we look at the small LSF collection of Caldwell poems (LSF:2004), there are surprises, as we read the poems. In one poem, "Cabin Creek, Near Ohley," we are firmly planted in a particular place, and so far as the poem would have it, we're to stay there (so far as the mind can do such a thing, and is willing to do it). You'll notice that in "Cabin Creek, Near Ohley," there's no appearance of the poet, except as he appears in the craft of the poem itself.

### **Cabin Creek, Near Ohley**

All along the winding creek  
one row of clapboard houses  
hugs the hollow sides.  
Tracks hold the level land,  
rusted rails curving through pocked hills.  
Mine drainage hemorrhages  
from ruptured veins  
of worked out tombs  
turning rocks along the creek purple.  
A cedar waxwing sits  
on a broken tavern sign.  
Redbuds dominate this quiet day,  
fuchsia branches  
dogwood,  
reclaiming sovereignty.

[p. 23]

Then, in another Caldwell poem, "Night Walk," one of his most philosophical (and yes, I suspect I have an affinity for such poems), we are on a "road" but this is not a road to be rendered in its particulars, as is "the winding creek" in Caldwell's "Cabin Creek, Near Ohley"; this is a road that gets us well beyond the hollows of West Virginia. Here is Caldwell's "Night Walk":

### **Night Walk**

Reflections of one thousand moons  
shine off puddles  
all along the road.  
All these moons  
belong  
to the one moon,  
lighting the way.  
When viewed  
in their oneness  
I see the world in a puddle.

[p. 32]

We might compare Caldwell's moon poem, "Night Walk," with Warren Woessner's "Clearwater":

### **Clearwater**

So still the reflection  
of the full moon  
on black ripples flickers  
like a candle flame  
in a gentle draft.  
Chased off by bass boats  
at twilight, the loons  
return now, call the lake  
their own.  
The owls. The woods.][p. 52]

And here is another "road" poem, "Late Winter Rain," also by Warren Woessner. "Late Winter Rain" is not quite so philosophical, so deeply reflective, but I find it delightful, nevertheless:

### **Late Winter Rain**

On both sides of the road mist grows up  
like beautiful mold  
on the last scraps of snow.  
The fields fill with meltwater  
and blackbirds.  
Geese occupy the lakes again.  
Overhead, the weather blows  
into March.  
Today time travels west to east.  
If I stay on this line  
I can drive north forever,  
dry, warm, and young.

[p. 44]

Reading Woessner (one of his poems leads to another), I

find still another road poem, this one quite mellow:

### **Way To Go**

At night it is a joy to drive  
toward home not too far away.  
The telephone poles are lost  
in thought. There is room to breathe.  
The farmyards sleep like dogs  
under the barn lights.  
Winnebago ghosts light slow fires  
in cornhusk tepees.  
A roadsign points the way to Eldorado  
but no one turns. Two white tractor tires  
mark a driveway outside Rosendale  
then the blue reflectors grow and fade.  
The lone radio station, demands a decision  
for Jesus, but I am safe, buried  
in the hearts of the saved.

[p. 57]

You may gather that I've developed an affection for  
"road" poems, and I suspect I have! Here are two by  
Frank Pommersheim:

### **Refugees in Autumn (or Back Roads to Far Towns)**

The road  
ahead  
is open,

Full  
of simple  
truth:

Butterflies,  
sadness,

dried blood.

[153]

The poet here, Frank Pommersheim, gets around, to presenting us what might be called a "no road" poem:

**Karma: From a Father to  
His Children**

There is  
a journey

But  
no road:

Fallen leaves,  
salt marshes,

The unswept  
path

of love.

I have presented several poems here by Frank Pommersheim, an American Indian, Indian tribal judge, who is a law professor at the University of South Dakota. I find Pommersheim's poems, both the road and no road poems, compelling. There is a great economy of language in Pommersheim's work, yet, the poems always seem to push on well beyond what one might see his as his efficient use of language. Pommersheim may make economical use of language but it gets, as do the best haiku poets, good mileage from it. Here are some

Pommersheim haiku-inspired<sup>2</sup> poems that I find quite beautiful:

### **Prayer for Nicholas**

I pray  
you find:

Peace  
near the river,

Light  
that is yours.

### **A Daughter Reading**

Kate reads  
and reads

the river  
of words:

sometimes  
the current;

sometimes,  
the salmon

in the current.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the acclaimed great masters of haiku is Bashō Matsuo (1644-1694), commonly called Bashō.

## **Children at Sleep**

Each breath  
fills the room.  
The current  
rises and falls.

You wish  
them well:

Sweet sailing.

They plunge on  
oaring  
through the night.

## **Alpha and Omega (for my children)**

As you  
walk into  
the beauty  
of yourselves,

Remember  
you are also  
walking  
into history:

The bloody  
earth  
of suffering  
and dreams,

The broken  
wing  
of witness  
and flight.

## **Prairie Haiku: A Series**

Fall

The blue sky erodes  
according to plains scripture  
as green wind scatters.

Winter

Empty fields stiffen  
in the barren embrace of  
pale light and dark snow.

Spring

Cottonwood trees bud  
with sweet breath of renewal  
in four directions.

Summer

Orioles fly by  
like gobs of black-orange paint  
splashing wild plum dreams.

## **Poem About Grief**

Why  
get over it?

For it remains  
(always)  
to be haunted  
by life's  
unforgiving radiance.

## **Dharma at Age Fifty-Five**

Mystery  
against dust

Wisdom  
against will

Hawk  
against nothing

[Note: Wikipedia (dharma): natural law, reality, the way  
of the higher truth]

## **History of Christianity**

Rocky soil,  
low sky;

weeds full of  
distant grace  
and sin.

**Poets and Fanciful Poems:** We expect poets to be, at times, fanciful (even whimsical). The problem is whether the poet's fanciful poem will strike the personal fancy of the reader. Here's a fanciful Warren Woessner poem that works, for me:

## **Report From Iowa**

Here the sky leans down and grinds the earth  
like a wet sheet of sandpaper  
pushed by an insane geologist  
trying to erase his mistakes.  
The people fight for cover:  
so few trees or caves.

Turn over any leaf  
and find whole families hiding there.  
They secure themselves with private rituals:  
festivals, dances, and hymns.  
It is said that ancestor worship is still practiced.  
Some men have been seen touching  
and speaking to dirt  
like defeated football coaches,  
imagining ancient games,  
trying to pick the winning side.

[p. 58]