

The Golden Years by Billy Collins

All I do these drawn-out days
is sit in my kitchen at Pheasant Ridge
where there are no pheasants to be seen
and last time I looked, no ridge.

I could drive over to Quail Falls
and spend the day there playing bridge,
but the lack of a falls and the absence of quail
would only remind me of Pheasant Ridge.

I know a widow at Fox Run
and another with a condo at Smokey Ledge.
One of them smokes, and neither can run,
so I'll stick to the pledge I made to Midge.

Who frightened the fox and bulldozed the ledge?
I ask in my kitchen at Pheasant Ridge.

A Sense of Place – Steven Curtis Lance

145 N. Cleveland St., Orange, CA 92866 USA

I need to be here where I belong
But I am not here because I need
Nor even because I belong here
It is just that I have always been

Here is where I feel a sense of place
I have never found myself elsewhere
But I found they did not want me there
That this is my point in time and space

I believe this and belief is strong
As the fragile fantasy I feed
By faith my memory tear by tear
Everlasting blooming evergreen

This place this moment belongs to me
And yet I can no longer bear it
I wish there were someone to share it
If only to see how good it can be

To share in the grace of a sense of place

January 1, 2009
Poetry

Region's Poets Convey a Sense of Place

By [TINA KELLEY](#)

MAYBE January is the cruelest month. The holiday bills fester, the garden catalogs have not yet arrived with their immodest promises of spring, and escaping to warmer climes is harder now that the economy has stopped working.

It's a perfect time to sit in a chair, calmly, with a lap robe and a comforting book of poetry, and to think about where we live, listen to the heartbeat of here, and learn how words mean home.

An abundance of talented poets write and live in the cities and towns outside of New York City, including the 2008 [Pulitzer Prize](#) winner, Philip Schultz, of East Hampton.

For this first Sunday of the year, a time for resolutions and the contemplations that go with them, we have asked some of the area's leading poets what they find close to home that inspires poetry and what their poems can tell us about where we live.

Westchester

Billy Collins, the national poet laureate from 2001 to 2003, has published nine books of poetry, including "Ballistics" (Random House, 2008). Mr. Collins, 67, has lived in Somers for the last 18 years.

"The location for most of my poems is generally between my ears," he said during an interview at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival, which attracted 19,000 people last fall in Stanhope, N.J. "Coleridge was one of the first poets to begin his poems in domestic settings — the living room, the fireplace, the backyard. I learned how to start a poem in a very familiar place and move away from that and use it as a launching pad to abstract territories."

Mr. Collins grew up in White Plains. "The suburbs have such a terrible rap as being neither here nor there, neither city nor country," he said. "I didn't learn about getting along in the city, or about deer hunting. They have a reputation for boring blandness. It's not until I got this house that I found my surroundings leaking into poetry, with a very attractive set of images."

Patricia Smith's fifth book of poetry, "Blood Dazzler" (Coffee House Press), was a finalist for the 2008 [National Book Award](#), and she won the individual National Poetry Slam four times. Ms. Smith, 53, has lived in Tarrytown for the last nine years.

"I've explored so much of myself through my poetry, I feel strong and rooted wherever I am," she said. "You kind of take your community with you."

But she remembers touring the county in search of a new place to call home before she found Tarrytown. "From sitting in a little bench outside the CVS in the middle of town, I heard people beep horns at each other, and saw people walking their dogs, and it looked like a place you could fold yourself into," she said. "Everyone's face seemed open, and everyone seemed happy to be living there."

The town's natural beauty, while not appearing in her poems, helps feed them. "I live so close to

the Hudson, and it's very inspirational," she said. "I get solace when I need solace."

New Jersey

Joe Weil, 50, consistently draws on the muse of Elizabeth, where three generations of his family attended St. Mary of the Assumption High School. His books include "Painting the Christmas Trees" (Texas Review Press) and "What Remains" (Nightshade Press), which includes an imagined encounter between the actress Susan Sarandon and a boozy and besotted narrator.

Mr. Weil explained the long-gone setting of the poem, a seedy bar on the Newark border called Two Friends: "It was owned, literally, by two friends who then stopped being friends, but still ran the bar together for 25 years. We called them Surly and Surly. They were both absolutely bald and never smiled."

He added: "It's not just people who are in love with each other who start to look alike. Sworn enemies start to look alike after 25 years."

For Mr. Weil, Elizabeth has become part of his muscle memory. "In a poem, it becomes part of the rhythms, the speech patterns, the rhythm of your lines. I speak Elizabeth. I have a voice somewhat like Joe Pesci's, but two bus stops over."

BJ Ward, 41, is the author of "Gravedigger's Birthday," "17 Love Poems With No Despair" and "Landing in New Jersey With Soft Hands," from North Atlantic Books. He grew up in Warren County and lives there in Changewater, which straddles the Musconetcong River. His poems don't tell us about where we live so much as they create places that are even more compelling.

"For me it's a question of does the place help define your poetry, or can your poems help redefine the place you live in? Would Rutherford be the same if William Carlos Williams hadn't lived there?" he said during an interview at the Dodge Poetry Festival.

Later, he said: "Place is what we reinvent in a lot of poems, in order to make it truer. So often we forsake what people might call accuracy for the sake of truth or truthfulness. If my hometown needs a priest to try to shut down the library, I will invent a priest to shut down the library if that's what my poem needs, even if that's not what occurs. In the act of writing a poem, your fidelity shifts from the world outside you that you observe at first, to the world inside that's asking to be expressed."

He loves living in rural Warren County in part because "it's largely unimagined."

"I'd find it much more difficult to reinvent Manhattan," he said.

Connecticut

Vivian Shipley has published seven full-length poetry volumes, including "Hardboot" (Southeastern Louisiana University Press, 2005), and five shorter collections. She grew up in Harlan County, Ky., and has lived in Connecticut since 1965. She writes extensively about both places.

"What I think is happening in our society, distinctive locales are disappearing," she said in a recent interview. "If you drive across the country on an interstate, you'll find the distinction in landscape pretty much disappear into structures of housing, Burger Kings, Domino's and Wal-Marts. I think we're really being leveled, and I think it's very important for poetry to try to preserve a uniqueness of place."

Ms. Shipley, 65, spends her summers on Morgan Point, where she became fascinated by the cormorants diving for fish in Long Island Sound. "I had all this information about them, and I was really interested in the subject for several years, before I found anything to attach it to," she said. They appeared in her poem about the mysterious crash of T.W.A. Flight 800 off Long Island in 1996, as counterpoints to the divers in black wet suits searching for remains.

[Ravi Shankar](#), 33, is the author of "Instrumentality" (Cherry Grove Collections, 2004) and is a founding editor of Drunken Boat, an online journal of the arts. He moved seven years ago from Brooklyn to Chester, a town of about 4,500, which he said was "probably the size of the apartment building I lived in." He enjoys living close to the Connecticut River, he said, and his walks along it have inspired him to write.

"Things I've been reading, conversations I've been having, phrases I have collected in my notebooks, and I think certainly going out to take a walk, they all help that," he said. "Wallace Stevens composed many of his poems while he walked down Asylum Avenue in Hartford. The pace of his steps make it into his poems oftentimes."

January 25, 26, and 27

English 2R – Mr. Hochheiser

I would never choose to be out for three days in row, but there are things in life that don't happen the way I'd want, so I'm going to be grading your Regents exams for the rest of the week while you begin thinking about our new unit, which is a historical and philosophical continuation of what we've been discussing, the effect that the economic and cultural transitions of the late 1800s and early 1900s had on Americans. The major piece we'll be reading is Our Town, a play about a town in which the two main characters grow up as next door neighbors and try to make sense of "our" world, but there will, of course, also be a bunch of poems and documentaries that go along with it.

1. On Wednesday, because a major element of the play is the exploration of its setting (time, place, and atmosphere), I'd like you to please read the newspaper article "Region's Poets Convey a Sense of Place" and the two poems, "The Golden Years" and "A Sense of Place."
 - a. The article is about the way people can characterize a place, answering the questions "If a place was a person (personified), what kind of person would it be?" and "How does it feel to be there (setting)?" "What is it about a place that makes me feel a certain way when I'm there?"
 - b. In the second paragraph of the article, Tina Kelley references something called "the heartbeat of here." While you're reading today, I want you to take note of both what is meant by that and how the poets portray it.
 - c. There is a discussion up on the blog (www.hochheiserela.blogspot.com) that asking you to write about the following three topics by responding to one another and writing your own answers to the following questions. My expectation is that you've all been onto this and written something before the end of the day on Friday:
 - i. What is meant by "the heartbeat of here"?
 - ii. What are Collins and Lance, the authors of the two poems saying about Westchester, where Collins lived, and N. Cleveland St.?
 - iii. Think about either the area where you live and/or Fox Lane High School and "characterize" it, briefly.
2. On Thursday and part of Friday, you'll be watching a documentary about two women who live in Damariscotta, Maine. It, like the play we're going to read, is called *Our Town*.
 - i. There will be another blog discussion that I'll expect you to participate in, at least once, by Tuesday. The prompts there, which you need to be thinking about and taking notes on during the movie, will include:
 1. How is the town of Damariscotta "characterized"?
 2. How is Walmart characterized?
 3. You've probably never been to Damariscotta (If you ever want, the

mussels – seafood – from the river are amazing), but it's not all that different from Bedford in a lot of ways. What would feel about Walmart opening up a super center in town?

4. Regardless of how you feel, how do you think the town would change as a result of its coming in?
5. If asked to sign either a "for" or an "against" Walmart coming to town petition, which would you choose and why?

ii. I'm currently thinking about Monday, February 5th as the due date for a creative project in which you'll "characterize" a place of your choosing. More details to come when I'm back, but:

1. I want you start thinking about a place that you know well and could convince people to visit.
2. How can you best convey what it means to you to be there?
 - a. Travel brochure?
 - b. Original poems?
 - c. Photo essay (e.g. iPhoto book)?
 - d. Propaganda poster?
 - e. Memoir writing?

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To wrap up then, as means of understanding what is meant by "place" and how important it is in our lives, you'll be:

- Reading a newspaper article
- Viewing a documentary
- Crafting multiple blog posts (one for Friday and one for Tuesday)
- Beginning to plan a creative project

For the substitute(s) on January 25^t, 26th, and 27th, 2012.

David Hochheiser's English 3r – Periods 1 and 2

Wednesday –

- There is an article and two poems for the students to read. They will, for homework, respond to a post on our class blog about what is meant by a "sense of place."
- They ought to be using the active reading strategies that we've been practicing in class.
- If they don't take it seriously, they will be finish too quickly, but there is plenty of reading, thinking, and planning for them.

Thursday and Friday –

- I need them to see the documentary Our Town, which I'll need you to set up using the laptop we've provided and the room's LCD projector. **YOU WILL NEED A STUDENT'S HELP TO LOG ONTO THE SYSTEM.**
 - In period 1, ask either Clare Koneval or Kevin Longo, one of whom will be in class on time and be able to help you with any technology needs.
 - In period 2, Dan Kapp and Amanda Asaro can help
 - The computer will need a power cord, the 1/8 inch jack (green for sound) and the blue monitor cord, all three of which are attached to the cart.
 - Turn the LCD projector on using the remote control that's "velcroed" to the left side of the white board.
 - The blue monitor cord is daisy chained to the elmo projector (big, white thing on the cart), so you'll have to turn that on as well and hit the "option button" to switch functions between the projector and the computer.



- Once the computer and the projector are on, playing the DVD ought to be pretty self-explanatory. The movie is only 56 minutes long, so there ought to be plenty of time to show it over Thursday and Friday, even if the technology piece takes a while.
- PLEASE MAKE SURE THAT YOU MAKE NOTE OF WHERE YOU ARE IN THE MOVIE SO THAT YOU CAN START IT UP AGAIN ON FRIDAY.
- The students are expected to be taking notes and paying attention during the film so that they can respond to the blog post I'm leaving for them.