4 X 4 for the *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, 2014

1. This issue radiates in a way around the idea of loss. The original goal for this gathering idea (I hate to say 'theme'…) was to have a kind of concentration of poems thinking about loss and the natural world, however many of the poems skim off, like thrown rocks, in related but different directions. Regardless of what sort of loss they are encountering or describing, however, the poems all come to that loss with some sort of purpose, be it elegy, eulogy or plea. Is this good enough? Can art, or poetry in particular, be an act of atonement (as Geoffrey Hill might have it) or an attempt at forgiveness, or anything at all like that? Why do you, or we, write to what has disappeared?

We write to what we've lost because having it evoked in language is better than an armload of the void. I think, too, paradoxically, that we write to feel more fully the loss. There have been occasions in my life when I have been weeping a little over one loss or another (a family member, a pet, a lover) and I've spurred myself into a storm a tears. I mean, I was aware that I was plunging myself deeper into grief. So, I think we write to the disappeared as a kind of catharsis.

What's related to this but more intellectual is the attempt to understand the loss. If we think of loss as kind of cognitive dissonance—this was true and now it's not—then we make art an exploration toward answers. This is true even maybe when there are no good answers. This calls to mind recent wars like Vietnam and Iraq. I think of Job. And this passage from William Stafford:

> There may be losses too great to understand
> that rove after you and—faint and terrible—
> rip unknown through your hand.

Based on what I know of his life from interviewing his family, his son's suicide was one such loss. My greatest fear is to lose one of my children, but a suicide? I dare not imagine.

Part of the reason we want to understand loss is that it is always a reminder that we are, in fact, not in control of our lives and our environment. This is related to Ernest Becker's notion of how and why we deny our own mortality. I think we live by this delusion that we are at the wheel and then one loss or another smashes through the windshield. Loss tells us that we are firmly in the grip of other forces. I hear a recognition of this in A.R. Ammons's poem, "Loss."

> When the sun
> falls behind the sumac
> thicket the
> wild
> yellow daisies
> in diffuse evening shade
> lose their
> rigorous attention

and
half-wild with loss
turn
any way the wind does
and lift their
petals up
to float
off their stems
and go

The lack of a period after "go" underscores the cyclic notion of this process. Loss is as integral to our *modus operandi* as failure.

> *2. Thinking back to our original impulse, how has the landscape where you live changed between the time you first saw it to right now when you look out the nearest window? How has that affected your writing?*

Where there was a mountain meadow, there is now a yellow house and a macro-lawn. I stood and watched from behind a window a bulldozer erase the meadow in one day. The wildflowers—lupine, larkspur, balsamroot—were replaced by lawn and daffodils. The elderberry trees were replaced by a view of the neighbor's sliding glass doors.

I ended up writing a poem about the loss of the meadow: "The Blue Elderberry Version." Writing the poem was a reminder in ecology. In exploring the loss of the meadow, and the big old elderberry trees, I started remembering all the times I'd seen birds perched there. Bullock's orioles, cedar waxwings, and gray catbirds all spent time tussling through those hollow limbs to gobble the pale blue berries of *Sambucus cerulea.* And once a big, buttery, and fluttering flock of evening grosbeaks stopped there to rest.

The land around my own house had been similarly scalped, but now, eleven years later, all the native trees and bushes I planted have grown to the height that birds nest in the golden currants, beaver gnaw the cottonwoods, and brook trout fin in the cooling shade of aspens, the same trees against which mule deer rub their antlers. Our house, with its small lawn and garden, is now surrounded by habitat and food for innumerable critters, including the western fence lizards who skitter through the wood chips I use for mulch.

Green needles and leaves have slowly pushed their way into the air outside every window, especially the ones facing that macro-lawn. And I have written about this regeneration, too. Directly and recently in a recent piece for *Orion Magazine* about how to make a house a home.

So, the change in the landscape has affected my writing in a direct fashion, but I'm sure it has affected it in other, more subtle ways I can't articulate. It may be that I need wilderness even more in my life and writing and reading after witnessing such a transformation.

I know that this event has definitely affected my behavior. When other neighbors looked to be making the same kinds of changes to their land, I started teaching them the names of the flora they wanted to eradicate: chokecherry, Brown's peony, snowberry, and Nootka rose. I had to be less didactic and more crafty. In something like a sneak attack at dawn, I told them how the arrowleaf balsamroot is in the sunflower family and has edible seeds. They seemed delighted by this fact and could hardly believe it. Once they learned the names of what they were cutting down and spraying with herbicide it was much harder for them to do so. They left that patch of meadow alone and made do with a smaller lawn.

> 3. *What writers, for you, have most convincingly grappled with loss? This seems perhaps a silly question in a way, but for some poets it certainly becomes a mode—for R.S. Thomas it is a monolith he pounds and pounds against, for Wendell Berry a book of prayer, for E.A. Robinson an overwhelming formal sadness, for Elizabeth Bishop a sort of knowing transcendence. But who, for you, through writing about the natural world or otherwise, has helped you understand what we've once had?*

In addition to the ones you mention, and those quoted above, most immediately and wrenchingly for me, there is the work of Cormac McCarthy. Beyond the Border Trilogy's lament of the loss of the Frontier (and I use this term to apply to more than the American one), I mean his post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road.* As I read it, he uses the relationship between a father and son as something of an objective correlative for our species' relationship with Earth. I have read and taught the novel a few times, but my wife has forbade me from any journeys through that bleak world because the ending made me sob hard enough to shake the bed, and twice my nightmares woke her from sleep.

And this all comes from what happens *before* the novel sounds its deepest note of loss:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

God, I love that passage. Maybe I love loss even as I rail against it? A romantic mode? Keats? In any case, these words evoke what Bill McKibben argues in the *The End of Nature*, a book of nonfiction that has profoundly shaped my feelings about the natural world and our place in it (I find it interesting that we use the term "natural world" as if we aren't part it—problematic and revelatory, I

think). And more recently, *The World Without Us* by Alan Weisman describes what the planet will look like minus people. We would be forgotten—grown over, washed away, blown down—in a planetary blink.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram writes about how language can be a wedge between us and the rest of the animals. Richard Louv, in *Last Child in the Woods*, argues that we have lost our connection with the natural world and coins the term, "nature deficit disorder." Many of the writers whose work appears frequently in *Orion Magazine* sing powerfully and intelligently of loss in its many guises: Sandra Steingraber, Rebecca Solnit, Janisse Ray, Derrick Jensen, Pattiann Rogers, Scott Russell Sanders, Jane Goodall, Barry Lopez, David Quammen, Robert Michael Pyle and others. The same is true of the poets in *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, a seminal volume recently published by Trinity Press that begins with a smart and wide-ranging essay by Robert Hass.

In *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson's character, Sylvie, is so full of loss that she is gorgeous with it. Because she has none, the world becomes her home.

I think of Wilfred Own and the losses of war and what he said about his poems:

> Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

I think about his words more and more in the context of climate crisis, species extinction, ocean acidification, and the choices we make every day.

I think of Chris Wiman's book, *Every Riven Thing*, poems infused with the fact of the rare blood cancer that has him in its grip. "God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made," writes Wiman, singing of how loss looks back from every face, every thing, he sees.

In his elegy for his father, "Drop Light," Timothy Houghton writes,

> People have spent their entire lives
> trapped in a body of time,
> in the wake of a dead parent perhaps

When Richard Hugo's lover jilted him, he drowned her in his haunting poem, "The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir." "Not my hands but green across you now" and "Lie there lily still" are two lines like slivers in my memory.

I think of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, her work and her life. When she lost her virginity by rape at age seven, she lost her voice for years. When her voice came fluttering back, it was all the more resonant for that silence and those years of keen observation and listening.

There is Andrew Gottlieb's story, "Stickmen," in which the protagonist grapples with his complex emotional response to his father's agonizingly slow death by MS. When his father finally dies, he is torn by feelings of relief and remorse.

Allen Braden's sonnet sequence, "Detail of the Four Chambers to the Horse's Heart," is a tender, understated elegy for his father that begins

> Listen. The last time I saw my father
> alive, he spoke of horses, the brute geometry
> of a broken team in motion.

In one of the most memorable villanelles we have, that stands, in my book, alongside Bishop's "art of losing," Theodore Roethke writes, "What falls away is always. And is near."

And now, Denise Levertov's Vietnam War poems come to mind. "What Were They Like?" ends with

> It was reported their singing resembled
> the flights of moths in moonlight.
> Who can say? It is silent now.

David Wagoner retells an account about the death of an ivory-billed woodpecker in the hands of ornithologist Alexander Wilson who captured it for study. The understatement of the loss in "The Author of American Ornithology Sketches a Bird, Now Extinct" is like a hammer blow: "He watched it die, he said, with great regret."

Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, tells so powerfully the tale of loss that it spurred the environmental movement in the sixties and led to the creation of the EPA.

I've had Czeslaw Milosz's, "Encounter," in me for about twenty years. His take on loss informs some of my thinking in my answer to your first question:

> We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.
> A red wing rose in the darkness.
>
> And suddenly a hare ran across the road.
> One of us pointed to it with his hand.
>
> That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive.
> Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.

And there's more, but I'm getting long winded, so I'll just say Jack Gilbert, Lucille Clifton, Thoreau, W.S. Merwin, Gary Snyder, Annie Dillard, E.O. Wilson.

4. What have you lost?

I started making a list and it became my life. So, we can look through the microscope of loss or the binoculars of possession. Everything I've lost I've *had* (loved, held, owned) in some way. That said, I think we keep returning to loss because it wins every time. The game is rigged: