POETRY OHIO
ART OF THE STATE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF OHIO POEMS

A Cornfield Review Special Issue

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This collection, the second special issue of *Cornfield Review,* is meant to stand as a companion volume to the first, *73 Ohio Poets,* published in 1978. While *73 Ohio Poets* is an anthology of poems on diverse subjects by Ohio poets, *Poetry Ohio* is a collection of Ohio poems of place. *Poetry Ohio* contains the work of 60 poets: 86 poems selected from approximately 1,000 submitted by nearly 300 poets. The Editorial Board, James Bertolino, Alberta Turner and I, attempted to select the best of the writing that came to us.

Poems were solicited through announcements in literary journals and newsletters around the country, through fliers sent directly to poets who now live and work in Ohio or who once did, and through what is perhaps the most effective means of communication for writers and editors, word of mouth.

While I do not for a moment believe that there exists an identifiable "Ohio poem" that speaks a unique language, I do feel that poets are uniquely qualified to portray a sense of their place, to fashion from river and field, high-rise and vacant lot the stuff of symbol and myth. A volume of Ohio poems, carefully conceived, can be like nothing else. It *means,* I am convinced, to live or to have spent time in Ohio. It was my intention from the start to freeze time with this collection, to make of the state a work of art.

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You might expect Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey or Mount Snowden, the New Englands of Robinson, Frost and Mary Oliver, James Wright's seedy Ohio River neighborhoods, Richard Hugo's ghostly Montana towns, Whitman's Mannahatta and W. C. Williams' Paterson to be places so limiting, delineated as they are by exact degrees of longitude and latitude, so confining as to curtail severely the effects of the poetry such poets make of such places. But we are in so many ways creatures of sense that just the opposite takes place in the well-made poem of place. Such locales can animate and be animated by their poems to such an extent that each particular becomes the universal, each specific the mythic, each place the only place.

In the successful place poem the poet takes to heart the lay of the land, photographs with the eye and sketches with the hand each landmark, breathes the air and tastes the water, places his or her ear to the ground and listens.

Of course, place can be *here* and *there.* Ten years ago, as a student, thanks to the beneficence of good friends, I left this country for the first time and went to Ireland. I walked the Dublin of Bloom and felt closer to my native Cleveland; scaled the heights of Yeats' Knocknerea and Ben Bulben and understood better the hills around Bellefontaine and Athens; slogged over the peat bogs of Seamus Heaney and thought of flowering beanfields around Marion. I still bear on my tongue the sweetness of the cream, the rank perfume of burning turf and tepid stout. The same words, but changed utterly. If I had three lifetimes to write through I could never get it all down. Such going to other places makes poets of us all. Returning home, like Whitman from New Orleans, we find we have picked up things to say.

To the ancients each rivulet, grove and tor was divine. Diodorus of Sicily writes of a lake not far from my own Erie: "Whoever has drunk of it falls into a frenzy and accuses himself of every sin committed in secret." Even the Hebrew god lived on a particular mountain, and the people were promised *land.* The good poem of place employs the natural energy of *somewhere,* generating power as blades collect the force of rushing wind or falling water.

Place can be haunting, haunted. Where is the location on this earth where no one was conceived, born, where no one died? Every inch or acre reverberates with the beating of hearts and lungs of the living and once-living. The dead have named nearly every place

we can visit or inhabit. What they have left we can sense. Place poems enable us to be in two places at once, to live forever, to leave whenever we wish this confining tent of bone and flesh.

I can think of few poets who do not make use, at least on occasion, of such energy. Even T. S. Eliot, as cerebral as he can be, takes us to real mean streets that stink of gritty, yellow smoke and to Little Giddings that run like no other streams.

So often the poem that lasts is the poem planted in familiar soil. The compass that points us home. The dowsing rod that, twitching, says *here* there is something good and true. Such poems are maps without which we could not find our way.

Reading the poems in this collection, we travel. We sniff, taste, feel. At the end we are free to become ourselves again, but better selves.

Abstractions, so attractive to young poets, are *nowhere*. It is too easy to build without taking care to survey, lay the foundations, dig the well. Without putting down footers, hanging the plumb line in a steady hand. But such poems seldom last. Our senses crave phrases and lines that reconstruct houses in remembered neighborhoods plank by plank, brick by brick, that plot each creek and alleyway, each molehill and mountain, that sound and look like and have the feel of home. I remember reading somewhere that the Druids took the names of trees and stones and made them letters of their alphabet. So should we.

The places in these poems we can visit time and again; such poems are far more accessible than those that are merely voices, confessions and ideas, or poems about poems about poems.

Where? we feel the human need to ask. Nowhere but *here*, poems of place respond. *There.* And therefore, *everywhere.*

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I wish to thank Alberta Turner and James Bertolino, two poets whose names are well known to those throughout this country who read and write poetry. I have admired their work for years, and came to rely heavily on their critical acumen and good sense. They readily agreed to serve on the Editorial Board, knowing their only reward would be the book itself. My gratitude goes too to the agencies and individuals that provided *Cornfield Review* with the necessary financial assistance: The Ohio Arts Council; Dean Micheal G. Riley of the College of Humanities of The Ohio State University; Associate Vice President Thomas L. Sweeney of The Ohio State University's Office of Research and Graduate Studies; and Dean Francis E. Hazard of The Ohio State University at Marion. I gratefully acknowledge *Poet and Critic* (published by Iowa State University Press), in which a portion of this introductory essay first appeared. I wish to thank too every poet who submitted writing to the Editorial Board; I can truthfully say that, thanks to these Ohio poets, I have learned a great deal.

As you move through these poems, remembering that each poem is itself a place, each word, I hope that you grow in your understanding of Ohio, of Ohio poems, of the state of poetry. These fine poets are expert guides. Go with them.

David Citino
The Ohio State University at Marion

II. THE GEOGRAPHY OF POEMS

Poems are not natural villagers. If they congregate between covers at a particular place, it is not to celebrate the place named on the covers or on the map, but to welcome the readers into places which will be named and explored only by the poems themselves. "Look," they say, "something funny happened on my way to the forum" or "Remember when we were kids and took your dad's car for a ride and the way he looked when ..." or "Do you know that place where they took up the tracks? Did you know a train went through there the other night, a slow freight, all flat cars and...." In each of the poems in this collection we go somewhere with the author. The places have names like Toledo, Oberlin, and Catawba Island, but the trip is always by underground railroad into the place where each of us lives alone.

In this sense all poems are about place: each poem is its own mountain, its own ocean; each poem identifies its poet's bed and chair, his bowl and spoon. With him, we, the readers, are six there and thirty and seventy-five. We wed there and bed and give birth. We stand in front of his mirror and tilt different hat brims or twirl a six-shooter. And we cruise after dark in our secondhand Chevys or Pontiacs, then sit on the porch with our shoes off and our feet on the railing and a six-pack on the floor beside us. Place in this sense is the floor, walls, and ceiling of our selves, and though the name on the envelope may be Howard McCord or Imogene Bolls, Bowling Green or Springfield, Ohio, U.S.A., it might as well read Atlantis or Antarctica. Stand a human soul on its head in space, without up.down, now/then, here/there, and it can neither perceive nor endure.

In this sense of place as center and direction, this anthology is true and representative. In the sense that Ohio is a distinct enough region with a distinct enough culture so that the themes, attitudes, subjects, and voices of native or former or naturalized Ohio poets can be distinguished from Indiana or Pennsylvania poets, place is an artificial separation, like a fence through a pond. Contemporary American culture has so homogenized what both rural and urban Americans read, see, hear, and do that differences among poetic landscapes can only be differences among personal visions. Some poets live in the desert, and desert is desert whether it is named Sahara or Death Valley or an Ohio cornfield after long drought. Some live on an Elm Street that is also La Rue des Trois Poissons and Via San Cristobel. Diane Kendig's poem takes place at sunset from the Terminal Tower in Cleveland, but the mood which caused the sunset clouds to "stack up gray" had also colored her view from the top of the Giralda in Spain and from the Canadian cliffs overlooking Lake Ontario. When Howard McCord says that "Ohio needs three active volcanoes," then has his Duke of Chemical Birds "un[zip] his blue feathers and [streak]/ the President's Garden/ at precisely six P.M.," we know that his Ohio *has* active volcanoes and just where they are.

In the geography of literal place all weathers happen in more or less predictable sequence. In the geography of inner place, of poetry, all islands float, all mountains erupt, and all skies can break blue. In this collection, Ohio is a map of the whole geography of human feeling.

Alberta Turner
Cleveland State University

III. AN ENDOWED DEMOCRACY

73 Ohio Poets was published in 1978, as a special issue of *Cornfield Review*. It was a good, representative collection. Here, six years later, you have another anthology of Ohio-related poems, also published by *Cornfield Review* under the general editorship of David Citino. There are differences between these two volumes, and they're worth exploring. As I assess the poetry, according to such standards as originality in the conception of the poem, vitality in the imagery, music and/or surprise in the use of language, and the dynamics of structure, I am convinced that *Poetry Ohio* is richer, more various, simply offers stronger and better poems than the first anthology. How can this be?

I am certain that the first editorial board was every bit as perceptive and professional as the second. While the second anthology was open to any American poet, and the first restricted to Ohio poets, the great majority of poets in *Poetry Ohio* live in the State—consequently, I don't think the quality of the second volume is due to the influx of poets from other states. It could be that because the poets were allowed to submit previously published poems to the second collection, the editors had better work to choose from. This is an important factor, however, the percentage of previously printed work in *Poetry Ohio* is small. My best answer to why the second anthology is superior is that there are simply more poets writing high-quality poems now than there were in the mid-to-late Seventies.

It's hard to imagine poets such as Gordon Grigsby, Howard McCord, Jane Somerville, Paul Nelson, Elton Glaser and Richard Hague being any better than they are. They, and others in this anthology, have written poems which combine highly-tuned intelligence with erudition, sensitivity, active imagination and the high disciplines of individual craftsmanship—in short, the kind of poems which used to launch and ensure national reputations.

American poetry now is like an endowed democracy. Endowed democracies, those which present a broad range of opportunities and possibilities for all, produce the most fully-developed citizens. Given two decades of increasing activity in small press publishing and community-based literary projects, paralleled by greater and greater interest in contemporary literature in the universities, we are witnessing a new "poetic citizenry" that is unprecedented in its general level of mastery and maturity. Any eclectic and discriminating selection of poems on any subject, or from any region, will provide a full spectrum of the many popular forms and styles being practiced artfully in the U.S.

If, as many of us fear, our country has yet to experience the full social, economic and spiritual wrenching necessary before it can return to the balance of health, we can at least find comfort in knowing we have thousands of accomplished working poets who may come forward to speak of our humanity and pain, and of our grand possibilities.

James Bertolino
University of Cincinnati