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## Places

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# Place: Memory, Poetry, and Drawing

## Laurie Olin

The accompanying drawings comprise two suites that were made within a brief period of time. Although I have drawn for most of my life and have produced stacks of sketchbooks and other drawings, I have a certain affection for these particular efforts. This is partly because of their content and tone and partly because they are mementos of particular places and time. Made during the late 1960s when the country and I were both undergoing crises and changing in ways that were unclear, they look long and hard at two very American landscapes of the West. Both sets of drawings were conceived and executed as sustained works. At the time I thought of them as related to the tradition of landscape meditation in American verse. Awkward as it often is to draw analogies between work in one medium to that of another, it was a conscious goal at the time, and it is interesting to consider from the safe distance of the present.

### Drawing Suites

On the surface the two are quite different. One is of things seen driving across Texas. It has a clear beginning, middle, and end, with a sustained point of view; it relies on a series of contrasting but related—either formally or thematically—objects and scenes. An underlying malaise persists throughout. Although many of the images are of phenomena that in

and of themselves are enchantingly beautiful, others are not, often blatantly so. The mood is pensive, one of controlled fear and anger. I had driven across southern Texas in the dead of winter, writing a note to myself as a tentative title “Driving in the Southwest on U.S. 90, Texas 87, Texas 6, Texas 36, Interstate 10, Texas 71, U.S. 290, and U.S. 80.” The group was made as a book. It isn’t really a sketchbook, although it is meant to resemble one, but instead a composition, more like a scroll, a score, or a story. The drawings were meant to be seen in a particular sequence, one page at a time, thereby forcing an element of time, sequence, and reading.

The other set of drawings of Agate Point is quite different in mood, content, and method. If the “armadillo book” has a clear form and theme, analogous to a classical sonata, the Bainbridge Island drawings have the looser, rambling open form—or even formlessness—of later nineteenth-century romantic piano works, hardly a sonata at all, more like études. Here all of the drawings are of one place, turned over and over. The tide goes out, the tide comes in. Boats are built, wrecked, and rebuilt. The land slides into the sea, and the water throws things up onto the beach. The sun rises and sets. A crow flies away, croaking in the fog. These drawings are as much about burrowing into a place as

the others are about moving through and away from one.

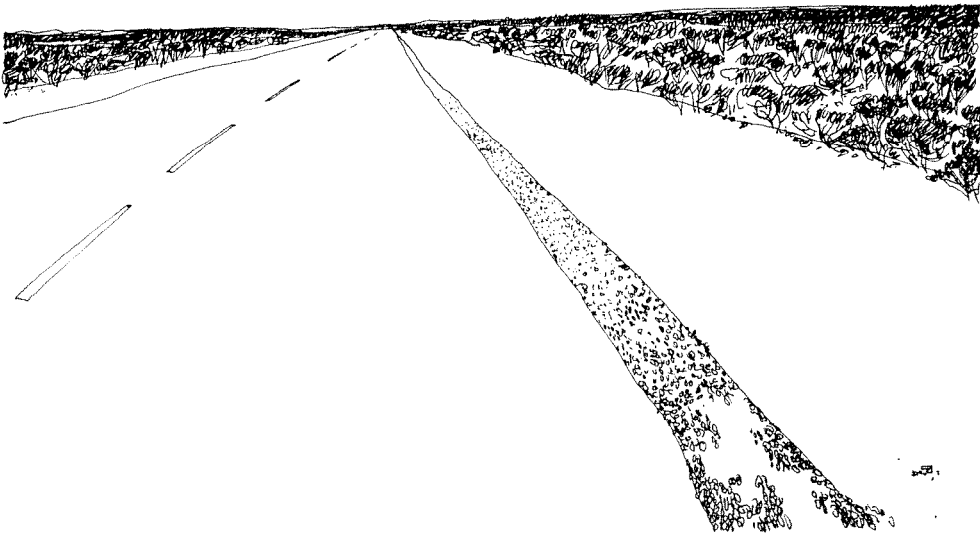
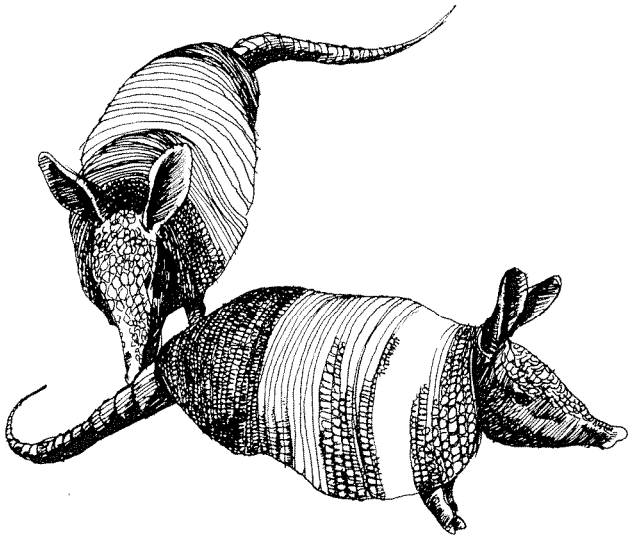
As in all compositional arts, what is left out is as important to the making and eventual success or failure of the work as what is included. Sometimes this is meant to be part of the statement or view taken in the work and can be considered content. In many cases, however, this is of interest and importance to the artist but not meant to enter into our experience of the work or its potential. In the last drawings of the beach, there is no indication or explanation of two things very much on my mind while making the drawings. One is the presence of Chief Seattle’s grave a short distance away across a thin strip of water; the other is that of a set of magnificent petroglyphs on an enormous rock facing east to Puget Sound and the sunrise. Although it is unclear to me how the drawings might or might not acknowledge these presences and their contribution to the persona of the place, at the time it seemed enough to present the back of the rock with the petroglyphs—a hulking presence—and the view that those ancient carved faces have had for centuries rather than a representation of them.

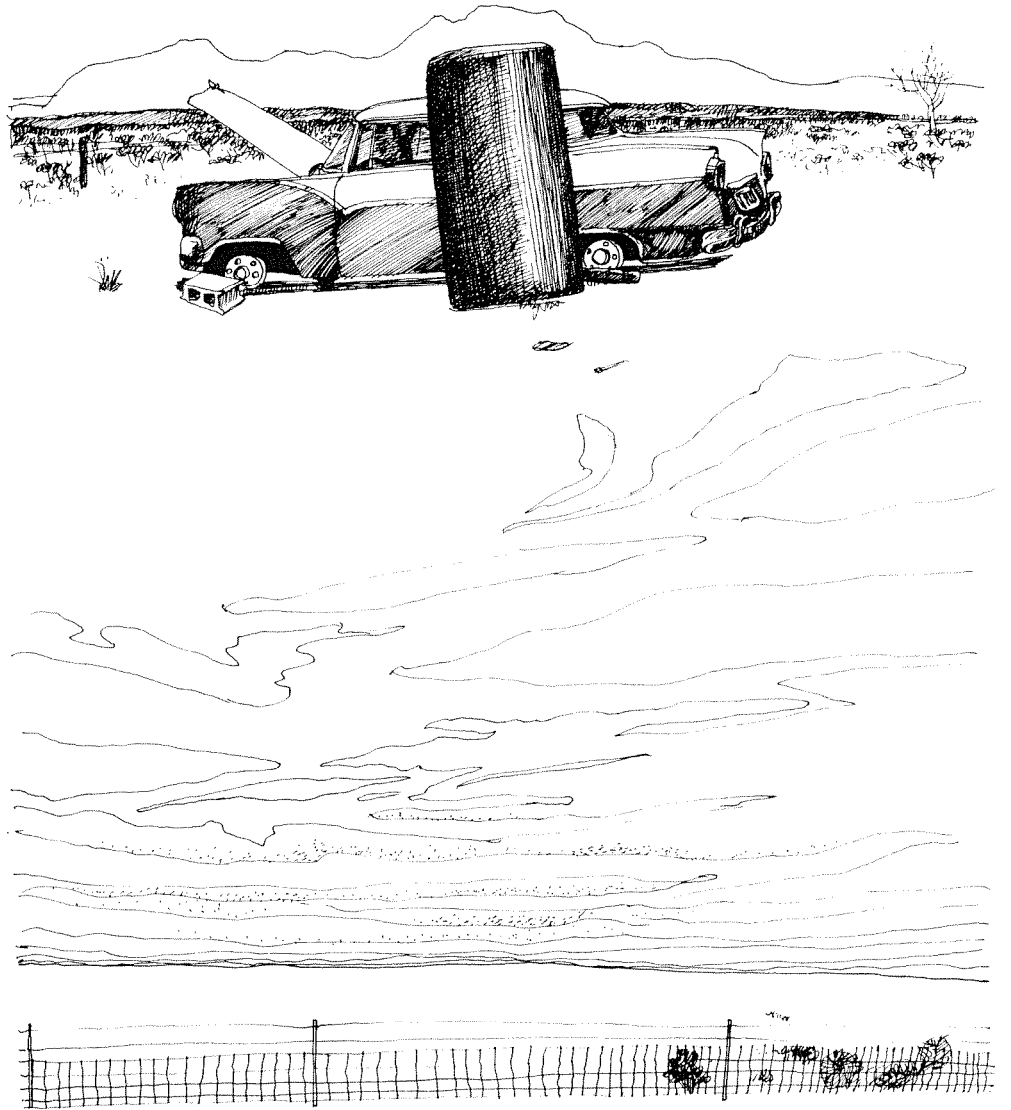
The activity that occurs in any place can vary from the tumultuous and crowded to the calm and solitary, but our perception and understanding of places will always be a personal and individual act. In the process

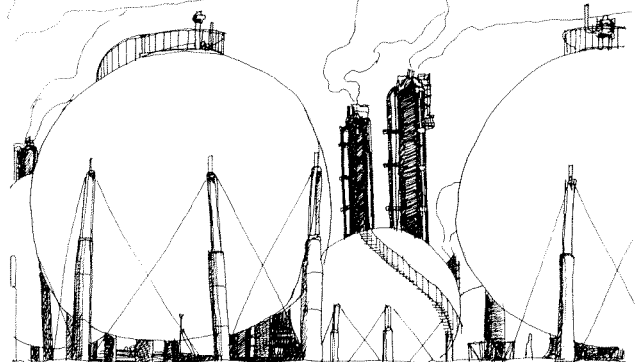
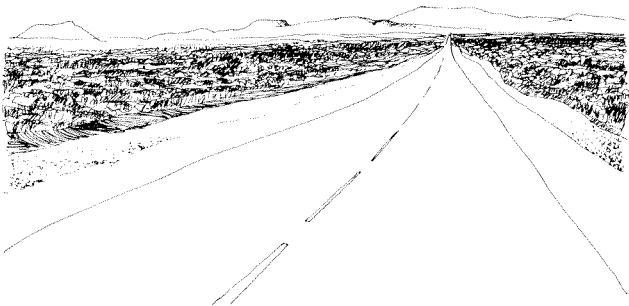
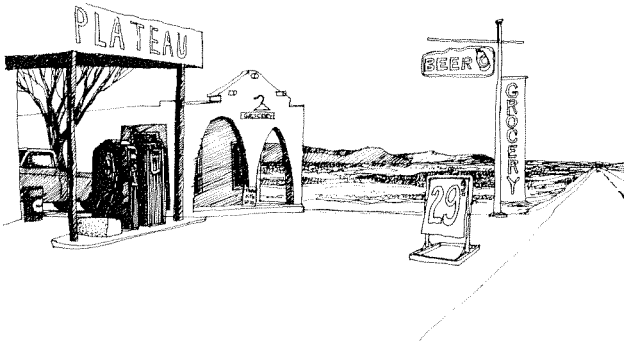
of learning about the world, we examine the elements with which it is made, weighing their relationships, and committing an enormous amount to memory. Long before any of us become designers, artists, landscape architects, or planners who record and make places for others to consider and use, we develop a truly remarkable ability to memorize the myriad

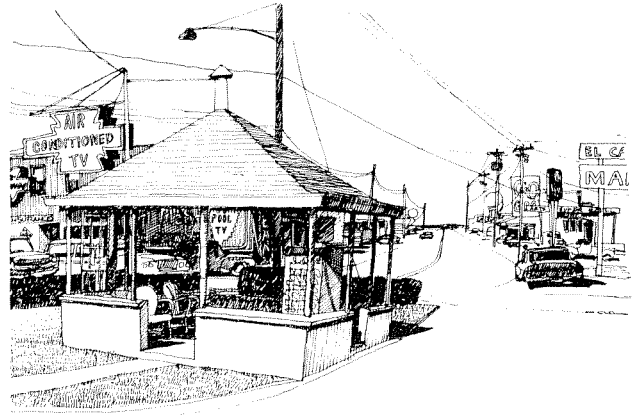
places of the world about us. These drawings to a certain extent are the exercises of a nascent landscape architect becoming conscious of the process that for most people is done without self-awareness or critical thought. It is in the making of worlds that we learn to reinvent the world and in the creation of new places, both good and bad, that we consciously and

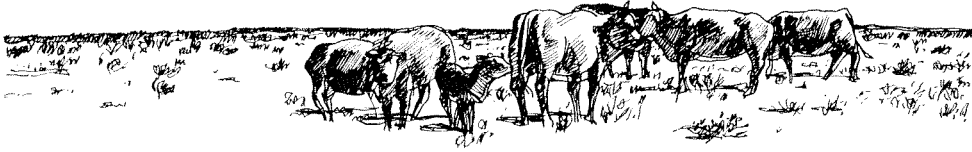
unconsciously draw upon our experience and knowledge of the places that already exist. In making places, as in all of art and culture, we make plans for the future, for what is not yet in existence, and always with only knowledge of the past and what is. In truth, all that we can know is memory. The rest is imagination.



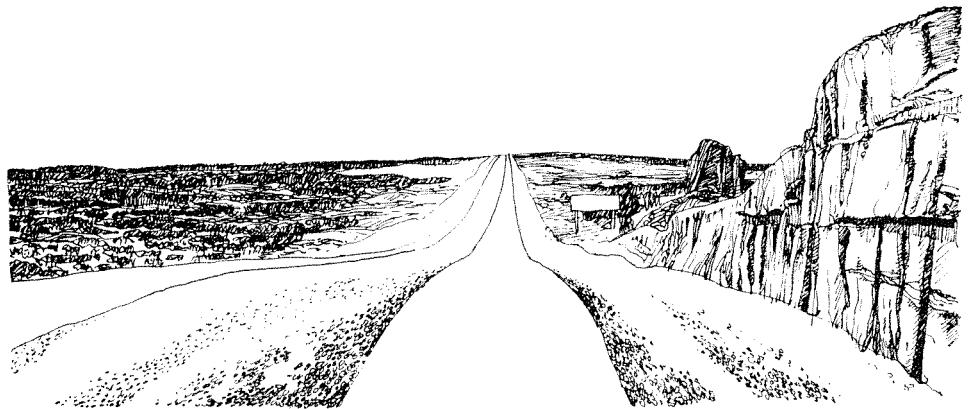
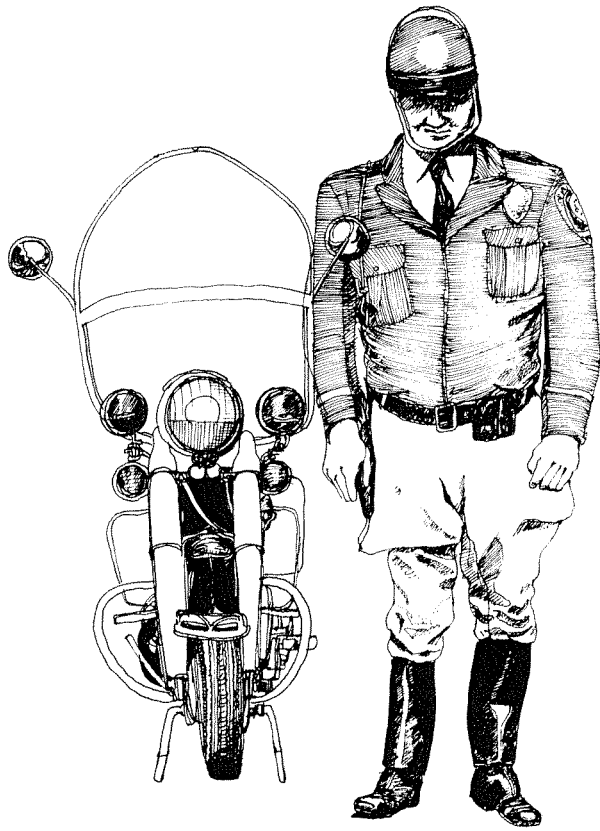


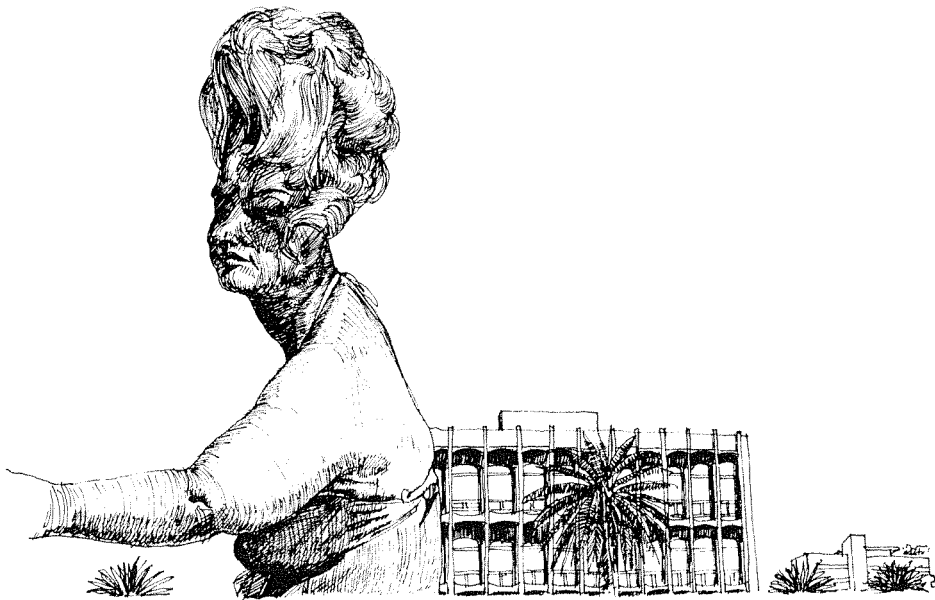
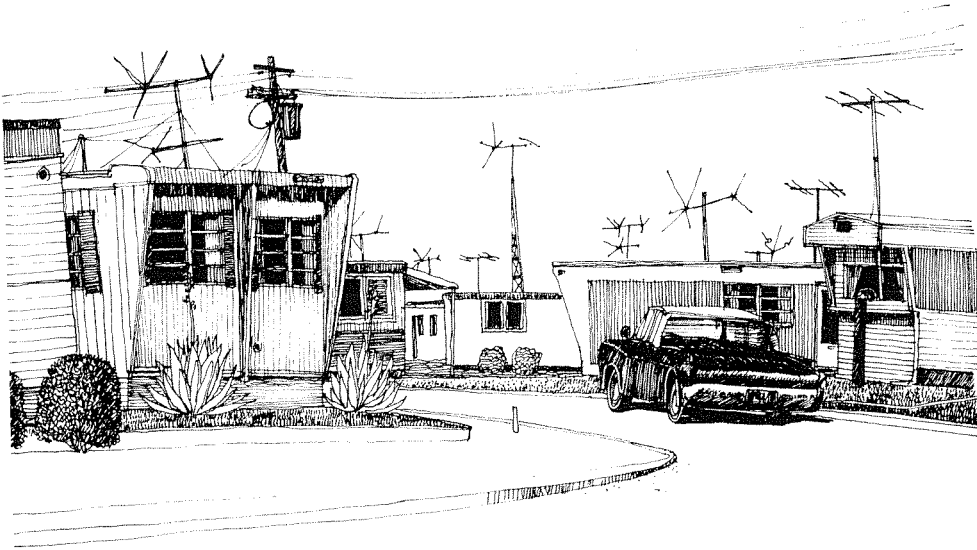


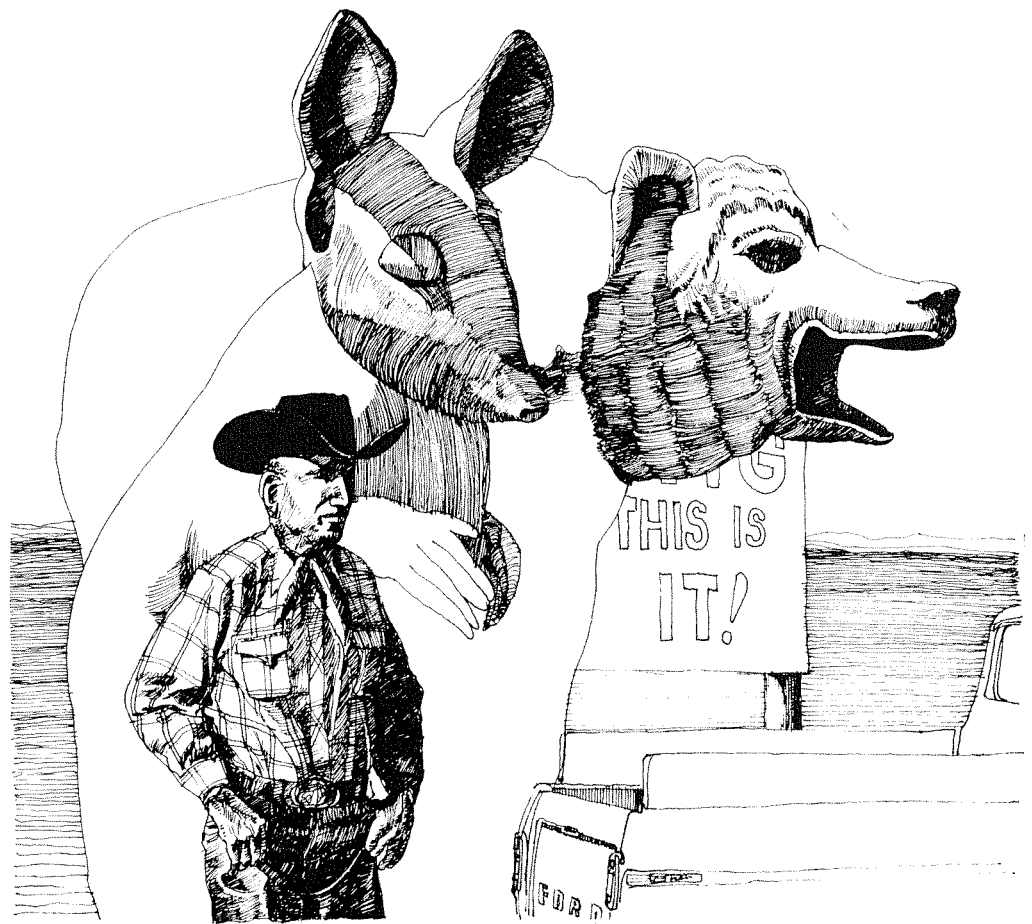
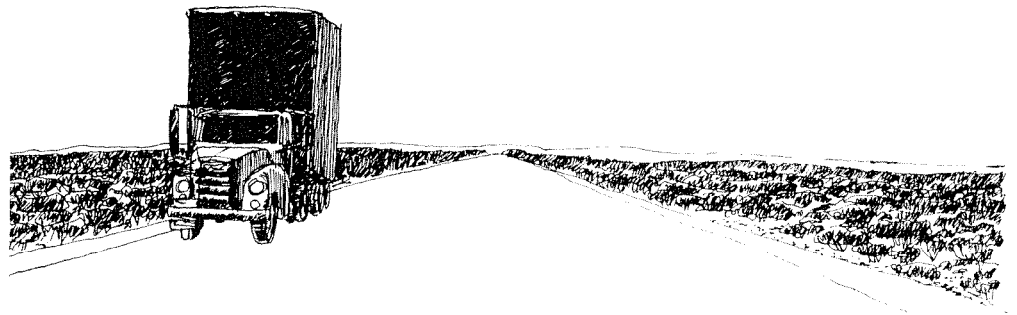


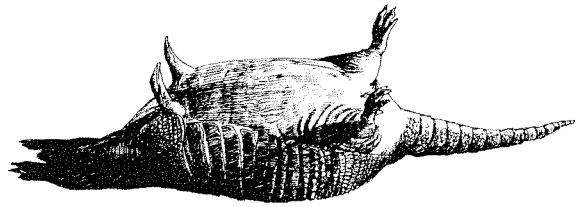
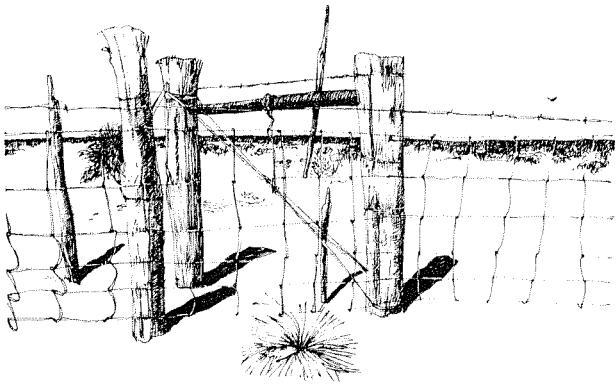
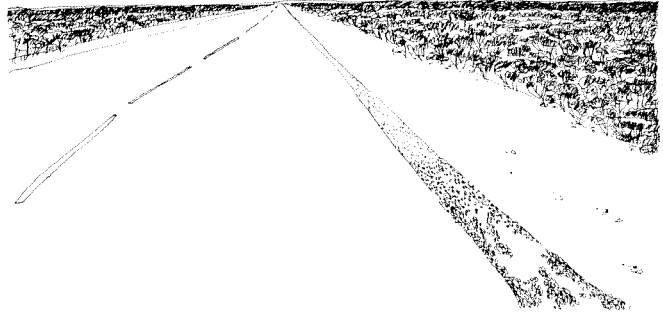
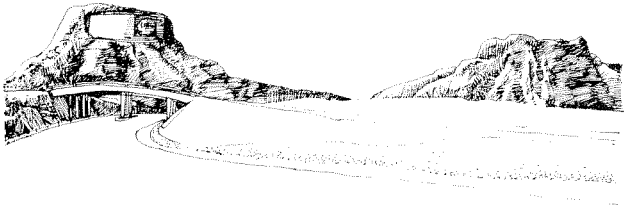












## Landscape Meditation in American Verse

The notion of a sense of place is bound to our memories of the world and to self-understanding. Places as such are composed of many elements that are highly variable and infinitely different. Yet all have in common the general truth that they are settings for our lives and self-awareness. Familiar places become memory theaters of the past and present. Unfamiliar places are stimulating or unsettling to the degree that we need to pay attention to them, both to find our way about them and to contrast them with our expectations, experience, and knowledge of the world. It is this link to memory, to conscious and unconscious thoughts, that gives places and our understanding of them importance and meaning, both individually and collectively. Particular places possess emotional and ideological associations—historic, patriotic, religious, familial, personal—for us all. These places can evoke childhood, with all of its pleasures and uncertainties; adolescence, with its self-awareness and sexual anxiety of particularly trying events and optimism; or our later adult years of work and accomplishments. Sometimes it takes only a few constituent elements of a place to evoke a flood of images and memories. Proust's *Madeline* may be the best example of a world

conjured up from an everyday object, but our literature abounds with characters and actions tied to particular scenes and the creation of worlds from fragments and glances.

In cultures where people don't move about as readily as in America today, landscapes become places of continual and perpetual memory—at times as overwhelming and smothering as they are supportive and nurturing. The restless movement and lemminglike surges of contemporary Americans from city to city and region to region has both destructive and constructive aspects. We are not commonly thought of as a very contemplative, introspective, or self-critical society. Instead, Americans are often characterized as being eternally optimistic, somewhat naïve, and undereducated about the ways of the rest of the world and the past. Such stereotypes need to be tempered by alternative views that hold up certain parts of New England and the deep South as hopelessly reflective and trapped in the past. The brittle Puritan Yankee landscape and bucolic pastoralism of Bucks County, the somnambulant towns and shimmering drowse of tidewater and bayou estates that come to mind, however, suggest that these clichés are based on a certain amount of truth. Beginning in these very

landscapes—quintessentially American—there has been since early in the nineteenth century a deep concern with the perception of a *sense of place* in American art, especially in painting and literature. The expression and search for things lost or discovered permeates our literature as it does our self-awareness. This interest has often taken the form of an exploration, a journey, a search. What is it that was lost? What were we looking for? What is found? Easy to ask, harder to answer.

There seem to be several lines of inquiry contained within the tradition of landscape or place literature. As in all of art, the first question is who or what am I, and how do I relate to others and my surroundings? The second is what is the nature and meaning of my setting? One of the best places to begin is in nineteenth-century painting, where one finds studies of the landscape of man and the landscape of nature. Homer, Innes, and Eakins show us the inhabited world, the artifacts, the light, and people moving about at work and play: fishermen, farmers, mill workers, particular people inhabiting an American world of a particular season and locale, going about their ordinary or extraordinary lives: men mending nets on the banks of the Delaware River, a boy driving cows back to the farm in the early evening meadows of Montclair, New

Jersey, a young woman carrying a lunch pail across a plank bridge to a mill in Maine at midday. At the same time, other painters, such as Moran and Bierstadt, gave us a world not made and barely comprehensible by mortals. The great plains and Rocky Mountains, the Grand Canyon and Yosemite, buffalo herds, vast horizons, forest fires, and countless animals of all sorts and sizes were presented as a vision of nature and the American West, as a cornucopia of unique and memorable places to stagger the imagination. One can go on, from place to place and period to period. The list is extensive: Bingham's trapper and Indian companion drifting between the islands of the Mississippi river in the limpid light of a summer afternoon, precursors of Huck Finn and Jim; the fractured light John Marin witnessed sparkling from the rocks, waves, trees, and clouds of the islands and headlands of Maine; Georgia O'Keeffe's blood-red hills of Abiquiu; the empty Brooklyn streets of Hopper; the low sharp light of winter in Manhattan as reflected in the chrome and glass of shop windows and buses by Estes. American artists have seen their world clearly and well and have rendered its variety of places immortal. This is as true for the ordinary as for the grand.

So, too, in American verse. As in Europe and Asia earlier, there have been two

traditions. One is a tradition that examines the human condition on a bare stage and is concerned with passion and feelings without regard to specificity of locale or time. In our era this is the poetry of much of the modern movement, as exemplified by Beckett and those who attempt to strip us to our motives and emotion, hoping to comment on what is constant and common in the human condition without reference to external settings. It is an art of powerful abnegation, difficult to make, often disturbing to experience, and finally bleak and wanting in its vision and possibilities.

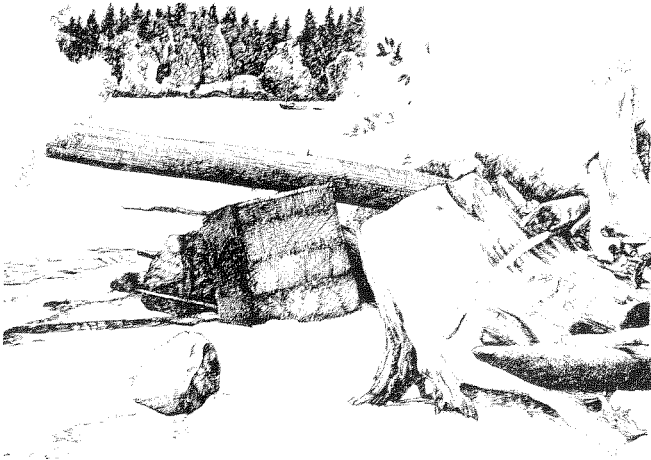
The other tradition, which has its roots in the classical periods of both Asia and Europe, examines the human condition with reference to shared or private experience, making use of the setting as a locus for action and understanding. Sometimes this surrounding world is barely noted or acknowledged, as in the poems of love, misery, loneliness, and joy of Catullus, Horace, or Li Po. Sometimes the setting becomes a major participant, contributing not only to the mood but also contributing time, action, or meaning, especially as a metaphor for the human situation, as in the *Four Quartets* of Eliot or the towns and places of William Carlos Williams, most noticeably Paterson, New Jersey. Earlier, of course, Marvel immortalized

Appleton House in his “green” poems about life, love, and social duty written after the English civil war of the seventeenth century, and Wordsworth transmuted the philosophy of Shaftesbury into the walks and meditations among his beloved lakes and peaks of *The Prelude*. Yeats with the *Wild Swans at Coole* and Keats sitting in a small churchyard at Lechlade down in the Berkshire countryside have established that landscape meditation is still one of the forms that lyric poetry can take, though the echoes go all the way back to Ovid and Vergil, to the *Bucolics*, *Eclogues*, and the *Georgics*.

More American, however, is the loose-limbed, long-lined rambling listmaking, name-rolling poetry that derives from Whitman. Steeped in the diction of the King James Bible and fed with the oratory of nineteenth-century protestant pulpit, Whitman’s pullulating catalogues of movement and places, people and names, strings of objects capture a particular quality of the American landscape and our experience. From Manhattan’s shore, from Montauk, and Camden, he set American verse on a course of its own that was to produce poets as different as Williams, Crane, Lindsay, and Roethke. Even Pound at his most European in the *Pisan Cantos* is enthralled with the America of Columbus, Lewis and Clark, Abe Lincoln, and Sacco and

Vanzetti. Williams’s *Desert Music*, Crane’s great leap from his beloved Brooklyn Bridge to the Golden Gate, Lindsay’s Congo and Johnny Applesseed, Theodore Roethke’s poems, conveying in loving detail and wonder the pleasures of bees in the basswoods of the midwest and the receding waves of a barnacled beach on the Washington coast, all of these and more come from out of the mockingbird’s throat that started at Paumontauk. Even influences that would seem totally disparate enter into this torrent of American poetry. Modern philosophy and cubist painting in the hands of Wallace Stevens produce a welter of American landscapes, images, and places. One region after another is conjured up in our memories: the bantam roosters in the pines of Appalachia, cemeteries, animals, and heat; the Caribbean of *Sea Surface Full of Clouds* and *Ideas of Order at Key West*; or New England, especially the Connecticut of snow, of winter, of the trees and crows silhouetted against the failing day, and human emotion in the details of place; and finally his snapshots and snippets of Americans on the go, tourists in other places, other cultures, wandering through literature and language as a landscape, a *Postcard From the Volcano*. One could go on and on. American verse is rich in the specificity of places real and

remembered. Robert Lowell’s oeuvre is as much about his mental landscape as people and their desires, frailties, and insights. The landscapes of New England and South America, of Europe and the West; our literature brings us a wealth of news about the habits and meanings of the notion sense of place.



**Agate Point, Bainbridge Island, WA**  
Drawings by the author.

