

Ryan Van Winkle: 'Tomorrow, We Will Live Here'

The title 'Tomorrow, We Will Live Here' is emblematic of the collection's obsession with place. The landscapes of America, childhood homes, 'The Apartment' that gives the collection its title. Often though, these places are remembered, explored but not embodied. In 'White Room' the lines about 'home' reverberated back and forth throughout the collection:

Home is not
a recognized place.

Home is a room
with a mirror

leaning against
the wall.

How do you feel about the 'homes' of your poems? And are your poems an instrument of creating/destroying places?

Home, an excellent starting point! I think the end of that poem is very much me coming to terms with the fact that I have grown up and moved away. Yes, there are a lot of homes / houses / places in these poems. In some way, my mental home is my childhood home of America and I am keenly aware that I don't live in the country of my birth. And I think I needed to mine that territory. There's this great David Lynch quote where he talks about being a young artist. He says that when you are young it is like being in an empty room with the window open. And all this stuff just comes flying in until the room is full and then the window shuts. From then on you spend the rest of your life moving that stuff around. I feel like that, like I'm moving around old furniture. Which maybe doesn't answer your questions.

Because it is hard to answer. I definitely have a complicated relationship with 'home' which is embodied in that quote. However, while my feeling of home being unrecognisable may be amplified by virtue of the fact that I've lived abroad for so long, I don't imagine this is a new or exclusive feeling. The places of our youth get unrecognisable.

I have loads of friends who's parents have turned their teenage rooms into a billiards parlour, a study or a guest room and I wasn't surprised when it happened to me and I guess I would find it rather creepy if my parents kept my room as it was with my Joe Quesada signed X-Factor comic and old concert tickets on the walls. So, I think I'm concerned with time as well as place. In the "Unfinished Rooms" sequence I'm acknowledging the passage of time and I'm trying to memorialise moments as well as places. In some ways it is an elegy to these places. Because, as we are all too aware, everything must change. You are going to come home and not recognize your old room and you are, one day, going to look in the mirror and not recognize your face. You are going to turn on the radio and not know what the fuck that sound is. So, in as much as I can, I'm guess I'm trying to take a picture of these places. And, you know, that poem ends with "soon the room will be complete." But the room is never complete. Because nothing in our lives is ever that pat. And hopefully, that line reads ironically. The laundrette you remember fondly from University is going to become a café someone else will love till it becomes a Chinese Restaurant.

I'm not trying to create or destroy places, I'm trying (and I've not really ever sat down to do this consciously) to remind myself of the sacred places. For that, I don't think I need to draw a place or embody it (which is a notion I hope I've understood correctly). Maybe I'm wrong for not wanting to do that? For instance, there's in a line in "The Slip (pt.2)" where I write

We could not afford

to change direction

drive to the dead end

where we used to go

when we were drunk

and just wanted to move.

We passed that turnoff

like it was never there,

And while the majority of the poem is about a woman / romantic relationship – that line is very much about where my friend Pete Swirsky and I used to go in our High School days, late at night, when neither of us were ready to go home. We'd drive down route 146, cross the line into Guilford, take a right, and cruise till we could see the moon over the marsh-land, and look out over the bay towards Long Island Sound. Sometimes we'd go alone, sometimes with Paul and Bill and it felt like the end of the world, those nights, something out of Stand By Me. Maybe we knew it would end, maybe we didn't. Sadly, Pete died very young (while I was living abroad) and while I've returned

home many times I've not gone back to that place. I pass the turnoff like it was never there. But it is kind of sacred to me, so I put it in the poem. Still, I didn't want to bring the reader there and talk about the water, the moon or anything because I think we all have these sacred places and describing mine wouldn't do anyone any good. By trying to describe it or embody it – I would have destroyed it.

Secretly, that poem is a love poem to Pete Swirsky. I dearly miss him. He was a real genius. He'd have been happy to have seen this book come out.

That's my answer. Though I'm not sure I actually answered your question.

- You've been writing for a long time, and have enriched Edinburgh's literary scene greatly in the decade you've been settled here, as well as appearing in publications around the world. For how long has this group of poems been interacting / emerging? How does it feel having to put such a block of poems together—was it hard to make them get along?

I get a little weird when people suggest I've 'enriched' Edinburgh's scene. Firstly, because I worry it sounds like The Forest, Forest Publications, the Golden Hour and I are going it alone and we're not. It takes a lot of people to make a scene and there is a history of art spaces and cafés and people doing similar things. We stand on their shoulders. In Edinburgh there was Café Graffiti and the Bongo Club long before there was ever a Forest and we have been lucky enough to build upon that. There's great people doing good work like the Scottish Book Trust, Scottish Poetry Library, City of Literature and other independent promoters like Peggy Hughes and Colin Fraser who are constantly making Edinburgh a place for writers and readers to be. We are just a part of that and I've been lucky enough to meet and work with a lot of these people.

Secondly, the word 'enriching' sounds serious to me and, really, my friends and I do this stuff for fun, because we enjoy making events happen, creating books, hanging out, getting drunk and talking shit. If we happen to be enriching, that's great, but it certainly isn't a goal and I wouldn't ever want it to be one. We just try to do things we enjoy and we hope others enjoy them too. So, while I'm pleased that some think of me that way, I really wouldn't want to take on that kind of responsibility. There are a lot of us working together in the city and via The Forest I'm very glad and lucky to be a part of that.

As for the the poems – they've been kicking around in a kind-of finished form from between 2006 – 2009. Some rough drafts existed two or three years before that. And, since this is my first book, it has taken a lot of time to make them work together as a whole thing because I mostly have been

writing poems for the sake of writing poems without giving much thought to how they'd work together.

Doing a masters in Creative Writing at Edinburgh University in 2006 gave me the precursor to this book and even at the end of that I still don't think I understood what a collection was. I thought you could just publish 60 well-written poems and call it a book. There were people in my class like Russell Jones, for instance, who was way ahead of me on that front and had a developed sense of poetic cohesion. Maybe because he was better read than I was. Anyway, by the end of that course, I had some good poems and a rough draft of this collection but it still wasn't hanging.

A few things helped me make decisions about this book. One was a painting by John Baldessari at Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, CT. It was one of Baldessari's classic text paintings and part of it said – “Solving Each Problem as It Arises ... Whatever the subject, the professional artist makes exhaustive studies of it. When he feels that he has interpreted the subject to the extent of his abilities he may have a one man exhibition whose theme is the solution of the problem.” (http://artgallery.yale.edu/pages/collection/popups/pc_modern/enlarge29.html) That was very profound for me and I used the painting as my pc's wallpaper for a long time and talked out the notion with my artist friends Mike Sanzone and Martin McKenna both of whose work I respect. And through those conversations I kind of understood that I needed to, at least, have a problem and that my book would answer that problem – to the best of my abilities. Because I didn't start with what I considered a 'problem' it took a while to figure out. But I'd been working with a lot of the same themes and concerns for a while – home, relationships, place, inability to communicate with those you love, memory – and all that fit in nicely with the notion of 'why leave?' which is why the McKibben quote kicks off the book.

“Why leave when you can live in a place you can understand and that understands you ?”

Once I decided to hang my hat on that, I felt a lot happier with the book as a whole. I don't know if I answer the question, but the book is certainly a rumination. In my mind, at least.

I also thought a lot about the works of artists I admire. John Glenday's very elegant and slender book – 'Grain' – was a huge inspiration as it is so tight and taut. A literary laser. And I had a very good lunch with Mario Petrucci whose book, “Heavy Water: A poem for Chernobyl” blew my mind. He saw a much longer, flabbier version of the book and helped convince me to focus the collection and not be weak willed or loyal to the eighty-odd poems just because I liked a line or because they pleased people at readings. I became very conscious of the idea of The Book as a whole.

After Mario suggested some major and painful cuts I turned to Bruce Springsteen, as I often do. He'd recorded hundreds of great songs (see: Tracks) that never appeared on any of his albums.

They're re-releasing *Darkness on the Edge of Town* with 21 extra songs that didn't make the original record. This wasn't because the songs weren't good, but, as Springsteen has explained, they didn't serve the thrust of the record. So, I tried to be merciless in culling poems from the collection. Basically, I tried to imagine I was Bruce Springsteen. Which I do a lot – but only when I'm drunk, alone, and dancing in the dark.

- Recently, I've been considering my own relationship between experience and poetry. It seems that these poems have been dug out of your own personal life and relationships. How do you navigate the apparent honesty of poems like the gorgeously tragic 'Under Hotel Sheets' or the explicit 'Babel'. Is it important for you to place your life at the bedrock of your poems?

Good question and I'm afraid it is going to get another long answer! Couldn't you just ask me what my favourite colour is?

Sharon Olds has amazing things to say about the 'apparently confessional' which she's gotten a lot of stick for over the years and I'd recommend looking into her thoughts on this. I remember seeing her at Syracuse University where she gave a reading of "The Living and The Dead" (one of my early favourite collections and her book "The Father" is totally incredible and very much an ideal collection) and the students kept asking her about being abused and her sex-life and she just kept knocking the questions back saying, essentially, they are just poems, that she's a writer and she was imagining characters. People were furious with her. I was furious with her! I mean, the poems felt so honest I was shocked that she could stand there and be so disingenuous. I'm told she now admits that her poems come from her experience which I'm slightly saddened by because can understand where she was coming from.

The way I keep myself sane and able to write about my life is multi-faceted.

1. I have come to understand that you can't completely 'write a person'. As a writer I'm sure you've sat down to write, say, about your mother. And as you do that I'm sure you realize there is a limit to what you can show of your mother in a poem. Even if you held nothing back, you'd have a crazy, incoherent, overly-complicated poem and, if you are like me, you'd still feel at the end that you didn't 'paint' your mother 100%. People are complicated and they have different facets and different faces at different times and it is very difficult to portray them fully. So you make choices, you take short-cuts, in an attempt to get at something that feels emotionally accurate though it might not be literally accurate.

So, when I am writing about myself or other actual people in my life, I have to hope they understand that I've had to take liberties in service of what the poem wants to be about. While I won't deny that some poems are very much rooted in my life and my experience I

think they only reveal parts of me and not the complete person. That said, I'm not particularly shy and I don't think it is any secret that a) I masturbate or b) I've had sex. I'm sure a lot of people don't want to hear about that stuff and I'm hopeful those poems speak to people in a way that doesn't sound like I'm being deliberately provocative.

2. Another thing that has helped me in writing 'apparently honestly' is just the sheer amount of time it takes me to write a poem. The way I work – and you can delete this if it isn't very interesting – is I'll write a poem in a journal. Let's say it is a love poem. I'm pretty prolific in the sense that I've got a lot of these journals full of rough poems and it can take a few years before I even look at them again. When I do eventually dig into those journals, time being what it is, I've often forgotten who or what I was originally writing about. So I'm not as raw and close to the material when I come back to it. And this allows me, I think, to embellish, omit, and not be true-to-life, but to still be honest within that.

But, yes, I do think it is important for a poet to put something of themselves into a poem. Maybe that comes from experience, maybe not. I mean, I have always been desperate to write poems outside of my own literal life experiences and wish I could pull off stuff like “My name is Joe Roberts and I work for the State” but I haven't been able to really do that successfully. That said, poems like “They Tore the Bridge Down” and “Ode for a Rain” are not based on my own life but I think my experience is the bedrock of those poems.

I'm not sure I'm explaining myself very clearly. Look, one great piece of advice I got early on was from Michael Burkard who, in my University days, got tired of me writing about drinking and yearning for women. He said to me, “Ryan, write about a table.” So I did. And what I learned from writing about a table is that I had to put myself into the table. In order for me to feel a poem of mine is successful I can't just describe a table – I have to understand the table – imbue it with myself somehow. Anyone can write eloquently about how shiny, scratched, heavy or long a table is so I have to bring something of myself into it in order to make it unique. You can see me trying to do this, perhaps clumsily, in “And Table You Are Made of Wood”. I don't really go for nature poetry but, I think, even if I wrote about a tree I would think about how I might feel as a tree. What experience do we share with a tree?

Anyway, I think striving for this kind of empathy with objects and people that are not me is essential for a writer. If I can go back to Springsteen again, he said something valuable when I saw him on the “Ghost of Tom Joad” tour. He spoke of trying to write about the Mexican immigrant experience in his sequence of south-western border songs, an experience he had no first-hand knowledge of. And, you know, Springsteen was very much a song-writer who used the lives of himself, his family and friends to make songs. And he said that when he was writing about these people who he'd only read about in the LA Times the way he got into the songs was to think about their commonality. So, take the immigrant experience – what is inherent about that situation which

we can all understand? Well, it is really an experience of someone striving. We can all understand immigrants because, at times in our lives, we have all wanted to get to some place better than where we are, have wanted to carve out a better life for ourselves, our children, our families. This, he said, was something he could understand. Right – this is 'Born to Run', this is 'a town full of losers and I'm pulling out of here to win'. And, sure, the circumstances and details are different but the power of that desire, the symbol of that desire is pretty universal I think. We all reach, we all want something that is right there – right across the border. We believe. And in our lives we make choices and sacrifices to get ourselves there. When he explained that it resonated with me and when I do write about characters who are not me, I try to find that string that ties us together and to use my own life where applicable.

- To move away a little from the actual poems, I was struck by the sweetness of your acknowledgements! I'm a pretty nosy reader, so I always like to scan these pretty carefully. You mention a lot of people, as well as the Forest (an Edinburgh-based arts collective that I miss muchly, especially their food), and almost give an impression of the book as a collaborative effort. Can you tell me a bit about the importance of community in your approach to poetry? Especially now, at a time when organisations like the Forest are under threat from the proposed arts funding cuts in the UK?

Ha, I'm a huge fan of notes and acknowledgements as well. My favourite one of recent memory was Axl Rose thanking Mickey Rourke, Donatella Versace and everyone at Best Buy (!?!?) at the end of Chinese Democracy. I felt I learned a lot about Axl there.

I'm glad you felt the acknowledgements were sweet. I agonised over them as I wanted to acknowledge a lot more people because, in some ways I do feel the book in one giant collaboration. I decided to acknowledge only people who had a very direct influence on the book though there has been a ton of tangential support.

For those of you who don't know – The Forest (www.theforest.org.uk) is a collectively owned, volunteer run, free arts and events space masquerading as a vegetarian cafe. We have an art gallery, an award winning Fringe Theatre (www.forestfringe.co.uk), a community darkroom, a rehearsal studio, meeting spaces, a screen-printing studio, a robotic church organ, countless free skill-sharing workshops and host events which are free to enter and free to put on. We also run record and publishing labels. (www.forestrecords.org / www.forpub.com) It is a flagship social enterprise which receives no government funding and is sustained entirely through volunteer power and is 'managed' by the people who use it. It was founded by some friends of mine and I began my involvement in late 2001. I consider it a beacon of grass-roots organizing and an antidote to the for-profit, cookie-cutter mainstream and it is something I'm very proud to be associated with and a project which I hope will continue to exist for a long time. It has given me a lot of heart.

That said, you are right to be worried about the fate of The Forest but not because of the proposed brutal cuts in arts funding throughout the UK. See, we don't get any of that money as we've always been self-sustaining with the help of volunteers and our gracious landlords The Edinburgh University Settlement (part of a federation of charitable settlements associated with the University in name only – a misnomer which is always tedious to explain). For the past 7 years they've helped subsidize the rent on our glorious building yet, due to the banking crisis amongst other things, they are being forced to sell the building. We're going to try to buy it with the help of our network of friends and sister organisations but – it is likely it will be sold to a company with more a lot more money and clout.

We're actually looking for 50,000 people to donate £10 so we can buy the building. Visit our website if you are interested...

The loss of The Forest would be personally gutting for me. When I first started working at The Forest in late 2001 I felt I'd found a home. In the summer of 2001 some friend and I attempted to found a collective of artists in Ithaca, New York which kind of failed though we all had a pretty good time. So, when I returned to Edinburgh and saw how well Forest was doing I leapt at the chance to be more involved. The reason I've maintained my commitment to The Forest is because I've always believed we get further – get more done – as a group, as a movement, then we can as individuals. I very much saw The Forest as a place that could breed and, in fact, grow talent. And, for the past decade, I think we've succeeded in that. I could write a list as long as my arm just of the bands who have had their early gigs at Forest, to say nothing of the writers, artists, photographers, academics, activists, community leaders etc who have developed there. And I think all of this is important. On a selfish level I feel it is essential for poets to interact with the rest of the world, to engage. And, yes, it does remove you from your bedroom and it does take time away from the desk and that has been, at times, very frustrating for me but mostly it has been insanely rewarding.

Look, my friends (not just within Forest) are incredibly important to me because I'm am lucky enough to get to hang around with very talented, very intelligent, witty, funny, artistic, scientific, multi-dimensional people. They say things, they argue, they quip, they make my computer work, they bring diversity to my life and don't allow me to get too myopic or, indeed, self-centred. They speak in interesting ways, I steal lines from them, they tell me about amazing projects, events, news stories and scientific achievements. They explain paintings, computers and dna and global warming and because I am not a naturally inquisitive person this is super important to me. I'll go out to a party and somehow I'll come home knowing about the Turkish drug trade or the Yugoslavian war. It is incredible just in terms of material. But it is more than that.

This community is that real-life link to experience and empathy. They give me insights into worlds I could never know. It goes back to what I was talking about earlier – that commonality. I have a lot

of friends who, on paper, I should never have met. On paper, there are not a lot of similarities between a privileged suburbanite and a Sudanese refugee or a punk musician or an avowed dork. But, here we all are. Working together. Without Forest, there is no way we could have met. Understanding, appreciating and working for a common cause breeds empathy and that, I hope, works its way into the poetry. I learn and benefit a lot from their experiences and talents and stories and I hope they get a some amount of enjoyment and benefit from working with me.

Slightly less abstractly, I wanted to thank every person and band who has ever played at The Golden Hour for free and every volunteer who ever worked in that kitchen or fixed the building's plumbing or generally committed in any way to the project that has given me a decade of enjoyment and, the confidence to keep writing.

However, I've also worked in a decade's worth of writer's groups – students and professors from my Master's and scores of writers all over the world have hacked and slashed and praised my work for many years. There's Nick Holdstock and Ben Morris and Katherine Leyton and all the others I mentioned who were very generous with their time and experience and very much helped shape the poems and, later on, the book.

I've always enjoyed sitting down with another writer and just beating the hell out of the work and I'm not precious about it and I'm not ashamed to say that I have taken on board a lot of criticism and critique and while I have been fearful at times that this has drained the work of its vibrancy, mostly I think it has made the poems stronger. I very much needed to know if the poems were having the effect I wanted them to have, if they were 'gotten'. In this way, I'm very insecure. The problem with needing to know that is that every time you show a poem to a new person you can't ever get them to look at it with fresh eyes again so you need to show it to someone else to get that new perspective to see if it is doing what I intend it to do. Sometimes it is. Sometimes someone will see it is doing something else and I'll have to dump the poem, alter it, or go with what the person read it as. So, a poem like “Gasoline” was supposed to be a little beat-nik elegy about the “too big world” and how sad and tiresome “the road” could be but Holdstock saw abuse in the poem and, yeah, I tweaked it to bring that notion out, if you are looking for it. So, on a very mechanical level I just don't feel comfortable with a poem till at least Nick and Ben have seen it and I really like hearing what other people have to say about a piece of work. I enjoy that process. That said, despite all the help, I do know that the final decisions rest with me and I don't listen to everything everyone says. Often I find myself defending the work and in defending the work I understand it more and get more control over it so even if I won't change a line or a word, I have to think about why I won't change a line or a word and that can affect the rest of the poem. My advice to all young writers is simply – get people you trust, honest people you think are talented to read your work. It has been a tremendous help to my work and I wanted the people who made the time to see a small measure of my gratitude.