

The Negotiating Eye: Is There a Northwest Outlook?

Vi Gale

A good question. Certainly some of us who have been in the writing field for a long time have heard how colleagues from other places look at *us*.

“There’s a writer under every rock.” “Such cowboys. Justin boots and Stetson hats. They roar around in pickup trucks and drink everything out of *mugs*.” “The men are macho chauvinists and the women, even the feminists, are frustrated botanists.” “Their poets write novels and play baseball.” “Their novelists milk cows and write bestsellers that get made into movies.” “They translate Sappho with fierce fidelity.” “The poets exile themselves to China, Japan, and Greece.” “Trekkies, sci-fis and scholars—when they aren’t humanists practicing self expression.” “They say it isn’t anthropomorphic, it’s Native American.”

Easy stereotypes, of course. But editors on the other side of the Mississippi sometimes imply that we don’t know alba from zeugma from Elizabethan rant from seven types of ambiguity and that we are all drunk on landscape. Sometimes we mildly mutter back:

From Oregon on a Slightly Less Green Leaf.

“Sorry. We don’t use nature poetry. Ours is an urban society.”

— *Eastern editor*

“May we see some more of your ecology poems.”

— *Same editor, fifteen years later*

I’m still here, barefoot and lank-haired
at the rocky edge of the same ocean.
studded with the arches, caverns and stacks.

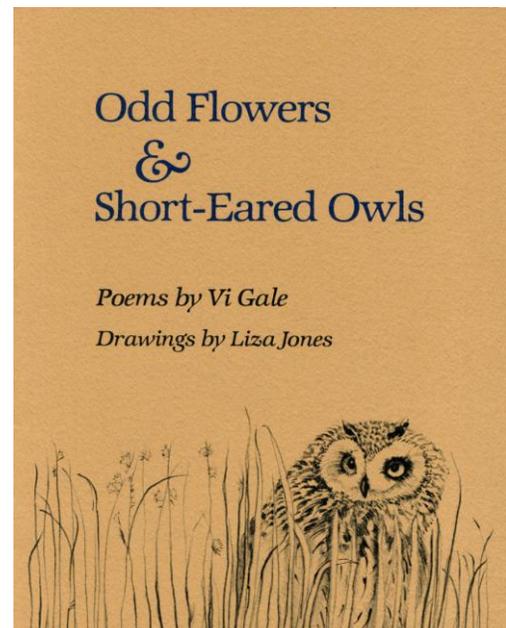
My song is about what it was. Thorny.
Low-key as wild blackberry vines circling
old logging spars on the burns.

Inland, the same native rockroses hug
their volcanic ground under high desert sky.
At night you can still breathe in the stars.

But you had a point. We lobby and legislate,
preserve dunes, purify rivers, save rain
forests, religiously lug back the beer bottles.

At that, pollution now hangs over snowcaps.
Dams and ladders threaten our salmon. Freeways
kill neighborhoods. Towns choke on themselves.

[Vi Gale, *Odd Flowers & Short-Eared Owls*]



If we get too paranoid about criticism we go wind surfing, skiing or huckleberry picking. This does not mean that we aren't serious or dedicated to our work. Or that we are being as independent as our maverick politicians. Often it is a case of give the horse its head and it will take you home .

We even kid each other. One year a student came home from the Haystack Conference and told me that the late Richard F. Hugo had said I couldn't use the word "salal" because it belonged to Hugo. Dick, wherever you are, I can hear you laughing. That student believed you, and she has probably distrusted certain specifics and particulars ever since.

The good writers of the Northwest are careful about merely dropping place names or zeroing in on landmarks—especially when depicting the old or abandoned which are easily made sentimental. We do have levels of meaning in what we write.



Vi at dictionary

In an early poem, written about 1955, I was trying to sort out some of these things. I wrote about the Elk Statue that stands in the middle of a downtown Portland street, noting that "it stares unblinkingly Northwest." The poem speaks of "an anachronistic beast...linked to what was wild but with no heart for a wilderness at hand." Some of the traditional art lovers were not amused, but a leading Northwest artist gave me a print of her version of the Elk. It was from a series entitled "Romantic Portland." Curiously enough, neither of us knew the other was working that same middle of the street. It led to a long-time friendship and teaming of poetry and art.

On a recent trip to the Coast we got caught by a *tsunami* warning that caused the town to be evacuated. The stuff of Northwest elan was everywhere. A bartender promptly raised the price of beer by a buck a six-pack, his waitress left her tips on the counter and hit for higher ground in a borrowed car. We heard she didn't even have a driver's license. People loaded kids, pets and belongings into cars. A little boy went by with his bird in a cage. The man with a big house on the hill suddenly acquired a hundred house guests. Sightseers clogged the roads while others partied, prayed or just waited. We spent half the night in a pickup truck, peering out to sea at the bobbing boats and ships that were also waiting for the all clear. Very likely it was different, but also the same, for those on the coasts of Hawaii, Canada and Japan. A rich metaphor. The editors are already getting the poems and stories.

Speaking of publication, visitors to the past few American Booksellers Association conventions have been lavish in praise for the books and periodicals from Northwest presses. Excellent work is coming from small literary houses in Idaho, Seattle, Port Townsend and Portland. The quality of the writing is

high, the production outstanding. As one reporter put it, “Eyes are looking west in a way they haven’t since the beats came out of California.”

We who live and work here are looking around too. Oregon’s poet laureate is always on the move to Europe, India, Japan or Singapore. Northwest filmmakers are being heard from. Our anti-nuclear activists are strong and articulate. More and more, especially since our political leaders are courting their business, we are feeling the influence of the Pacific Rim nations on our culture. Arriving Asian immigrants bring new thread for an earlier ethnic fabric woven by Finns, Swedes and Irishmen. Literary translation flourishes and flows both ways. The printed word is being enriched by a lot more than a Douglas fir or a sprig of kinnikinnick these days. Our old provincialism, if it ever was that, is fast being eroded.

As an area we have really never been culturally deprived. In addition to that kind of wealth around us, and it is developing all the time, Northwesterners jet around a lot. As a friend told me, “I love going to Europe where everything is older than I am.” But she didn’t miss a festival or theater season at home, either.

Truly, for those of us who are here by choice, and the convert tends to be more fervent than the cradle-born, this is the most wonderful place on earth. There is room to move around, live independently, and work undisturbed. We’ll be happy to be allowed to live out our days in its volcanic dust, road apples and rose petals with all the grace and style we can muster. And with a tip of our big hats to William Shakespeare for:

Let every eye negotiate for itself,
and trust no agent.

From: *Northwest Variety*:
Personal Essays by 14 Regional Authors
Edited by Lex Runciman and Steven Sher,
Arrowood Books, Corvallis, 1987

Dedication in Vi Gale’s *Clearwater*,
The Swallow Press, 1959, 1965, 1970, 1973, 1974
to her poetic friend & colleague Penny Avila



Vi with Dorothy Stafford

Especially for
Penny
with all good
wishes for her
writing success,
D.
11/13/74