Sense of Place
Seven Poems
from the “Sense of Place Poetry Challenge”

a PLACECRAFT Project edited by Dave Self

sponsored by California Poets in the Schools
as part of the 2019 Sonoma County Poetry Festival
Celebrating National Poetry Month
These poems were submitted to “A Sense of Place Poetry Challenge as part of National Poetry Month (April, 2019).

For this challenge, Dave Self and Susan Maxwell asked folks to create a poem about a wild place that inspires them to return again and again. Dave wrote: “What inspires you to visit a trail or site again and again? Is it the way fog fills the valleys on a summer morning? Is it the silhouette of large oak trees at sunset? The way the grasses ripple in the ocean breeze? A certain flower or a set of flowers gracing the shoulder of a hill? The chance drumming and calls of a pileated woodpecker. Or the promise of fresh mud, which might hold the prints of a passing coyote or mountain lion.”

Four Poets responded, with seven poems, below. Enjoy!

Visit www.placecraft.net to learn of other PLACECRAFT Projects, including the PLACECRAFT Journal (coming July 2019).
every few day

on the trails of Red Hill

i stop to see and hear

tree buds bursting,

a pileated call ...

echoing thru the pines,
a newly unfolding flower,

the rising sun ...

crested the rim of a new world ...

backed by a dawn chorus,

... or fresh lion tracks

in the mud ...

and i witness

these happenings

in simple poems and a few pictures.

down in the dusty world

some may

"laugh at me

and say:

"It's all foolishness, your work!"

but others know,

they come to walk with me

on these old trails,

and every time,

we find and share
treasures common and rare

and we ... cherish

the pleasures

of time ... well spent

witnessing beauty

and daily miracles ...

with wonder

and in good company.
Now, when I’m older, quieter

I can finally see the omnipresent road signs

slanted sun of morning caught in the dust of a forest trail

white lilies and wine-red chalices tempt the hummingbirds

a sharp bright reflection in the brook where a

rainbowed silver trout jumps and is gone

Now, when late afternoon sun slants on puzzle bark trunks,

raises earthy scents from the oaks to mingle with vanilla and pine
I follow the trail where once I hesitated

listen with muted ear to the locust, the bee,

the rustle just off the path

The forest path leads me on to somewhere or nowhere

I pause, breathe, and with timid smile

give thanks to the slanted sun
a gray morning on Healdsburg Ridge
by David Self

soft low clouds
leave hundreds of crystal droplets
neatly arranged on each grass leaf,

the clouds leave
blue-dicks drooping,
sparkly,
and ready to drip,
the clouds leave
  a few drops on a lupine flower
  highlighting it’s tiny speckles,

the clouds leave
  the shooting stars
  aimlessly waiting
  for sun-lit directions
  while their bumble bees
  await a bit more warmth,
Meanwhile,

the pert

mule-ear flowers

are drip-dry

and ready

already

despite the drizzle

for

everal

morning

bees.
for the children

by David Self

from 4/14/2019 “Walk with Wildflowers and Poetry” on Helen Putnam Regional Park, Petaluma
the wind

green, grassy

rolling hillsides

are rippling

in the strong coastal breeze.

but the scattered dense patches of oaks

hardly notice,

their tough leaves quietly whisper

and their stiff branches barely sway,

as the wind passes by.

hikers

lots of folks are hiking the hills today

and like the breeze

most hurry by,

and they hardly notice,

as the grasses ripple

and the oaks whisper

and a light scattering of wildflowers

blooms and sways

amongst the rippling grasses.
fathers and sons

a few fathers with their sons,

are here

sharing

a day of excitement

fishing,

the promise of wild food,

time together.

passing knowledge, skill and thrill,

and they

barely notice

as the hikers and wind hurry by.

redwing blackbirds

several redwing blackbirds

trill from the top of the reeds

showing their bright red and orange

shoulder patches to each other

and singing,

a ringing endorsement and claim

to their patch of cattails

that ring an old stock-pond,
through the spring and summer,
    they are home.

    here, they'll hunt,
    make love,
    hatch, feed and fledge their youngsters,
    and sing their songs.
    and gather their own meals
    every day,
    as the hikers, the fathers and their sons
    and wind
    all hurry on by.

wandering
a few deer wander by
    in search of dinner,
as my nephew, a new friend and I
wander,
    seeking a sense,
    glimpses,
    of what this place was like
    just 200 years ago.
as we find a wildflower,

we share

some of the words of known uses

but these flowers are few and scattered,

we can’t find

enough seeds for toasting,

enough greens for a salad,

enough iris leaves to make a fishing net,

and the willow branches

are too crooked and twiggy

to make even one basket

most of the wildflowers and bunch-grasses

that once cloaked these rolling hillsides

and valleys

have passed by like the breeze,

... swept away

by a century of ranching

and the cows and their ranch

have become a park.
today
we find few wildflowers
  hidden in expanses of annual grasses,
  grasses from the other side of the world,

we find a few patches
  of young native needle-grasses
    crowded with the annual grasses,
    an abundance of Italian thistles,
    a scattering of California poppies,
    and bits of yarrow

a few bright yellow native flowers.
  sun-cups,
    show up in the trampled edges of the trails

We spot a tiny scattering of blue-dicks
  hidden amongst the annual grasses
  a dozen shooting stars
    and a handful of wild irises
      in the shade of oaks
        on a road cut.
At one view point we see
distant patches of buttercups
on neighboring ranches.

we imagine
fishing with nets and strings of iris fibers
two fibers per leaf
how many leaves would we need?
fishing with toggle hooks
made of ceanothus twigs

we imagine a fish soup
with checker-bloom leaves
miners lettuce
wild onions
(where are they?)

we imagine large, dense
patches of blue-dicks,
like lakes
and a seasonal celebration
with thousands of bulbs
roasting in an earth oven
and we imagine
ten-thousand bulblets
left to thrive
in the freshly
tilled
patches

what was this area like
when home.
before?

before
cows and ranching,
better, cars, trains, planes,
and international shipping
before
the wonder of
guacamole
every day
before we used up nature
before civilization reached this place
before we learned to treat
remaining wild areas
as if they were
displays in a museum,

what was this place like
before,
when Miwok folk
were caring for wild plants?
tending the hills, valleys, woods, thickets?

resonating

plucking leaves, tilling bulbs, firing the grasses,
coppicing basketry willows,
weeding sedge beds
‘wild gardening’
in sync
with the seasonal patterns
of each of plant
of each place
the Miwok
these ‘gardeners of eden’
strummed the ‘beings of this place’,
enhancing their rhythms
as good gardeners do.

like the strings of a guitar,
they ‘strummed the beings’
of this vibrant landscapes
refreshing
the pulsating abundances
of each
shifting plant
and place
... each resonating
with the seasons

and in exchange
the plant-beings and places,
gifted the people
as gardens do
with all of the seasonal foods
and medicines
and materials,
that they needed
for living, and birthing, and dying,
weaving, cooking, singing
and celebrating
all of the seasons
for centuries
in
this
living
world.

for the children
can we learn
to dance again
with the seasonal cycles
of wild plants
of this place?

will we learn to sustain
and celebrate
the wild greens?
the wildflower seeds for toasting?
the wild irises
    for fiber and beauty too?

will we learn
to savor
    the wild flavor
    of this place
    and each season?

and in the end
will we learn
to cherish,
    celebrate
    and sustain
    the wild world again
    as hearth and home
    for the children’s children,
    for the master weavers,
    and for all of our wild kin?

I do so hope
that we can
    begin, again!
one of the neighbors says

‘there were only a few oaks here

in the early 1960’s’

much is now a dense thicket of oaks,

tangles of poison oak and blackberry,
patches of french broom
and a dozen other
invasive garden plants
and garden remnants
and the remaining grassy area,
which ‘was a prune orchard into the 1970’s,
it’s now almost all
non-native grasses and weeds
with a scattering of
black walnuts
and a few young oaks

another neighbor says that
‘before the prunes
the whole area was
sheep pasture
with a few scattered oaks’

this neighbor also says
‘there used to be vernal pools here
before they were filled by plow and farming,
and the creek was deepened into a ditch’
yet another neighbor says

‘there used to be
a pomo village
a few hundred yards to the south.’

searching for native wildflowers
today,
we only find
a dozen dwarf lupine*?

what wild flowers
danced here
before sheep and plow and prunes,
when the pomo were tending the plains?
as we explore
we do find
clammy-weed* patches
an invasive plant
of the paintbrush family’
that look like
butter-and-eggs from a distance
and I think

“there should be three or four owl’s clovers,
also paintbrush family,
including
butter-and-eggs*,
valley tassels*,
purple owls clover*
little brown ‘soft’ owls clover*

we spot

a few carrot-like
bishop-weed* flowers
and their carrot-like leaves are abundant.
i think “yampa”,
a tasty native of the carrot family,
should be here,
and those yampah
would support
caterpillars
of the native
anise swallowtail butterflies
(and I love the flavor of yampa roots, leaves and seeds).
a winter puddle spot
  hosts a scattering
    of prickle-seed buttercup*.
and i imagine
  swaths of western buttercups
    california buttercups
  and swales of bloomer’s buttercups

blueish gleams from an abundance
  of spittlebug spittle on the bishop-weed
    make me think
      baby blue-eyes, blue-dicks, Ithuriel’s spear, camas
    all of which i found a few miles west
      on a similar site
        when i was a student
          at the state university
            40 years ago.

one neighbor asks
  ‘how many kinds of wildflowers
    would have been here in the past?’
and i answer ‘maybe 150 to 200,
which is roughly how many i listed
from that other site
40 years ago.’

other wildflowers i remember
from that other site ...
mule-ears
royal larkspur
checker-bloom
shooting stars
meadow-foam
California poppy
pretty-face
white wild hyacinth
narrow-leaved milkweed
(a monarch favorite)
a half-dozen native clovers
and many, many others
the abundant and diverse
wildflowers
bulbs
herbs
spring greens,
of that other site
supported
butterflies,
myriad native bees
flower-flies
lizards, frogs, salamanders
ground-squirrel
badgers ...
and these wildflowers
once sustained the pomo
as food, medicines,
fibers and more
and the pomo, in turn,
helped sustain
the wildflowers
with burning,
tilling,
tending.
What might we do as neighbors
with hope, determination,
scouting, weeding,
planting and seeding?
as we,
and our children
get to know
the wildflowers
and wild flavors
once again?
At the Point
by Karen J. Brown

It took an hour
Winding along the bay
Sweeping through
the eucalyptus curtain
Gauzy green scent
A threshold to the
Golden day

Westward all the way
Past alphabet farms
Well, not the lighthouse
Today

We're heading to the edge
Water and sandwiches
Sneakers and hoodies
We three fall in line

Dropping off and laughing
Waves wink
Knowing we're out of
Reach

The elk around here
Somewhere stick together
Your lighter legs skip ahead
In search of horns
Rivulets distract you
In the crevice from the rains
An opal sheen
Magic enough for
Open eyes like yours
Until we spot the coyote

We’re at the point
Between winter and spring,
Fate and family
What we were
And are becoming
We don’t need to arrive

Lunch is unanimous
And also a nap
Between boulders, iris,
And little yellow petals

I heard Papa’s silly story
Resting gently in the grass
About the starfish and his
Adventures on land,
Another satisfying conclusion
Back home on his rock

Further ahead the trail drops
Then rises, it doesn’t seem
Long to reach the end,
To perch on the peninsula
And hover over the water

You and I
want to go all the way
Though we know our kite’s string
Is at the end of the spool

We roll up, and let the wind
Push our backs, racing up hills
Holding hands and recognizing
Our new friend, the path.
Ephemeral flowering.
Sunset of Baby Blue Eyes,
Azul gems peak and fade
From forest understory.
Tide of spring retreating.
Fleeting fast
like Skink under foot?
Azure tail evanescent with age.

A flutter of wing
Ground to tree?
Quick to gather
bits of prior seasons.
Bluebird beaks.

A flutter flower to flower?
A neither 'here nor there' trajectory.
But an interest with proboscis,
Species continue.

No clear finish line.
Is spring transitory

As the long day Locust?

Overlay the scene, still green
With an annual array,
Advertising to insects
Thirsty for supple sweetness.
An impetus hovers
with the impish.
Puck’s dancing
in dense woodland.
Feasting on impermanence.
Ceasing moments
Before they veer off
Into golden hills.

Impetuous and spontaneous
As Iris and Poppy.
"I only have so much time"
They ring and they leave.