

## 2004 William H. and Jane Torrence Harder Lecture, Cornell Plantations

### “From Whiteville to Ithaca: The Scenic Route of A. R. Ammons’s Poetry”

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Corsons Inlet, Gravelly Run, Cascadilla Falls, Triphammer Bridge, Brink Road: place names like these are everywhere in A. R. Ammons’s poetry. Indeed, while I haven’t made an exhaustive inventory, I wouldn’t be surprised to find that the names of places outnumber the names of people in his work. Not all the places in Ammons’s poetry *have* names, of course, but the fields, deserts, beaches, mountains, and yards he summons forth all take on the specificity and depth of landscapes that have been lovingly inhabited. Yet to describe Ammons as a “scenic” poet is almost as misleading as calling him a nature poet (a label he despised).

The word “scenic” has been used disparagingly by some critics to denote a kind of poetry that contents itself with picturesque renderings of landscapes and encounters. By contrast, the “scenes” of Ammons’s poetry are never merely static backdrops to be admired for their beauty or grandeur; rather, they are full and active participants in the drama of the poem. The natural environments he evokes (and for Ammons, all environments are essentially natural, governed by the laws of motion and entropy) define basic possibilities of vision and self-knowledge. The cosmos looks different in the desert than it does beside the sea; so too does the self. While some poets have happily devoted their lives to mapping a single terrain—think of Wordsworth’s Lake District, Frost’s New England farmland, Jeffers’s California coast—Ammons drifted nomadically in his work from one setting to another, knowing as he did that each had its wisdom to impart. In an early poem, “Rack,” he hints at the profound connection between self and scene:

The pieces of my voice have been thrown  
away I said turning to the hedgerows  
and hidden ditches  
Where do the pieces of  
my voice lie scattered  
The cedarcone said you have been ground  
down into and whirled

Tomorrow I must go look under the clumps of  
marshgrass in wet deserts  
and in dry deserts  
when the wind falls from the mountain  
inquire of the chuckwalla what he saw go by  
and what the sidewinder found  
risen in the changing sand  
I must run down all the pieces  
and build the whole silence back

Ammons here seems to posit an initial coherence or unity of voice that has been irrevocably shattered and scattered. What gives this poem its startling drive is the speaker's determination to track down every shard, wherever it may lie. We meet here an early expression of Ammons's lifelong fascination with the philosophical paradox of the one and the many. The voice, and by extension the self, is usually understood as monadic, singular, yet this poem represents it as ineluctably plural, dispersed among a wide range of settings—hedgerows, ditches, wet deserts, dry deserts, mountains—each of which must be visited and explored if the self is to be made whole once more. An environmentalist in the deepest sense, Ammons understood that the self can never be abstracted from its environment, and indeed can only be fully apprehended in its ongoing dialogue with the spaces and objects that surround it. As he memorably declared in his poem "Gravelly Run," "it is not so much to know the self / as to know it as it is known / by galaxy and cedarcone."

I'd like to explore with you some of the crucial scenes in which Ammons searches out pieces of himself and his voice. I'll be focusing on four settings, each of which played a major role in both his work and his life: the farm, the desert, the shore, and the backyard. As a biographer I'm aware that the scenic trajectories of the poet's life and art diverge at certain key points, and this has forced me to choose between them in ordering my discussion. I've decided to privilege the order of the life, following the route Ammons traveled from his childhood home in Whiteville, North Carolina, to his final destination of Ithaca. But I must begin by noting the oddly telling fact that the landscape of Ammons's formative years, his family farm, does not appear in his poetry until his second book, published some fifteen years after he had begun writing seriously. Why Ammons chose to delay writing about the place he knew most intimately is a puzzle I hope to address more fully a bit later, but one clue may lie in the story of shattered dispersal told in "Rack"; if the pieces of your voice have been scattered throughout the world, then surely the last place to begin the search is on your home ground.

## 1. The Farm

Yet that ground did eventually find its way into Ammons's poetry, and while he never dwelled on childhood memories as obsessively as some poets have, he periodically revisited the scenes of his early life, as in the following brief lyric, "I Went Back":

I went back  
to my old home  
and the furrow  
of each year  
plowed like  
surf across  
the place had  
not washed  
memory away.

Even in this compact little poem we can see how complex and dynamic Ammons's sense of place is. Two metaphors seem to wrestle each other for dominance: the agricultural metaphor of furrows plowed in the earth, and the oceanic metaphor of surf washing across a beach. If plowing produces a kind of inscription, carving lines into the soil much as a poet writes them on the page, the surf acts as a relentless eraser, smoothing away all traces of human presence. Yet from a grammatical point of view, the furrow is the primary subject of the verb clause "had not washed memory away," while the surf appears as part of a subordinated simile. This makes sense when we recall that on a farm new furrows are plowed each year, obliterating the marks of prior seasons. Both furrows and surf thus threaten to efface the memories that stubbornly cling to the poet's native soil. Of course the poem's point is that memory *does* remain alive in this landscape despite the erosive forces of time. For Ammons, his home country, understood both as the particular farm he grew up on and the surrounding region of eastern North Carolina, is haunted by past associations, echoes, and images that can never be washed away.

Yet Ammons also knew how fragile memory is, how we must labor to preserve our images of what has been. He learned this lesson at an early age, in what I'm convinced was the formative experience of his childhood. When Archie was four years old, his younger brother Elbert died. In a short autobiographical essay, he wrote "I have images of him lying in his cradle covered with a veil, and I saw his coffin being made, and I watched as he was taken away, his coffin astraddle the open rumble seat of a Model A. I see my mother leaning against the porch between the huge blue hydrangeas as she wept and prayed" (*Set in Motion*, 35). One image in particular seems to have left a deep impression on Ammons, as he recalls in an interview:

The most powerful image of my emotional life is something I had repressed and one of my sisters lately reminded me of. It was when my little brother, who was two and a half years younger than I, died at eighteen months. My mother some days later found his footprint in the yard and tried to build something over it to keep the wind from blowing it away. That's the most powerful image I've ever known.

While it may seem strange that Ammons had to be reminded by his sister of what he calls the most powerful image of his emotional life, he's surely right to ascribe this lapse to repression rather than to simple forgetting. In fact, the image of his dead brother's footprint in the dust, temporarily protected from the wind by a crude shelter built out of love and grief, reverberates throughout Ammons's poetry, though it never appears there in a purely literal guise. One would be hard-pressed to find an image that more poignantly captures the perennial conflict between transience or change, embodied so often for Ammons by the action of wind upon sand or dust, and the human need to hold on to and preserve fragments of its own existence and those it has loved. It is thus an image of memory itself at its most elemental; and in his struggle to remember and recast it in his poems, Ammons was in a sense simply completing the work begun by his mother so many years ago, building another kind of shelter for the traces and echoes of human passing.

Ammons confronted his brother's death most directly in his great poem "Easter Morning," which begins with these unforgettable lines:

I have a life that did not become,  
that turned aside and stopped,  
astonished:  
I hold it in me like a pregnancy or  
as on my lap a child  
not to grow or grow old but dwell on

But while the poem eventually identifies the owner of this unlived life as “my little brother who died,” it offers no concrete images of the event and its circumstances. It was not until Ammons published his final book, the long poem *Glare*, that he could bring himself to incorporate a specific memory of this episode in his work:

I see the eye-level silver shine of  
the axe blade the big neighbor carried

at our house at dawn, and I see the  
child carried off in arms to the woods,

see the sapling split and the child  
passed through and the tree bound

back: as the tree knits, the young  
rupture heals: so, great mother of

the muses, let me forget the sharp  
edge of the lit blade and childish

unknowing, the trees seeming from  
our motion loose in motion, the deep

mysteries playing through the ritual:  
let me forget that and so much: let

me who knows so little know less:  
alas, though: feeling that is so

fleeting is carved in stone across  
the gut: I can't float or heave it

out: it has become a foundation:  
whatever is now passes like early

snow on a warm boulder: but the  
boulder over and over is revealed,

its grainy size and weight a glare:

We can surmise that the country ritual described here was meant to transfer healing energy from tree to child, and that he was therefore already gravely ill. It is surely no accident that the most insistent visual detail is the “sharp edge of the lit blade,” itself a potential instrument of death as well as healing. That image takes on added resonance as Ammons declares “feeling that is so fleeting is carved in stone across the gut.” Unlike a footprint in dust, a carving in stone cannot be so easily expunged by wind or broom. This axe blade, with all its tragic implications, has left an indelible scar on the poet’s psyche. We can hardly be surprised, then, by his anguished plea for relief from the burden of memory, even as he recognizes that Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, is the “mother of the muses” and the foundation of his art. The longing to forget and the impulse to remember remain perpetually at war in Ammons’s poetry, which helps to explain why the scenes of his childhood appear there with relative infrequency, fraught as they are with unbearable associations.

In the late 1950s, Ammons wrote a series of poems that form his most sustained engagement with the remembered landscape of the farm in Whiteville. While none of these refer directly to the death of his brothers (a second boy was stillborn the year after Elbert died), all are pervaded by a sense of loss, much of it displaced onto beloved animals like Silver the mule and Sparkle the pig. A few years after penning these animal poems, Ammons wrote his most poignant tribute to the farm and its inhabitants. “Nelly Myers” is an elegy for a mildly retarded woman who was taken in by the Ammons family to help with housework, make brooms, and perform other odd jobs. Ammons lovingly records her folksy neologisms, her physical ailments, and her irrepressible exuberance, ending the poem with this anguished outburst:

oh where her partial soul, as others thought,  
 roams roams my love,  
 mother, not my mother, grandmother, not my grandmother,  
 slave to our farm’s work, no slave I would not stoop to:  
 I will not end my grief, earth will not end my grief,  
 I move on, we move on, some scraps of us together,  
     my broken soul leaning toward her to be touched,  
 listening to be healed.

Readers accustomed to the detached, alternately thoughtful and jokey manner of Ammons’s later poetry may be surprised by the unabashed emotionalism of these lines. Such intensity of feeling, when it does appear in his work, seems inextricably linked to his memories of the Whiteville farm, a landscape that Nelly Myers embodies in her weathered simplicity and cheerfulness. But the dominant note here, as in the animal poems, is grief for a world that can never be recovered. In “Easter Morning” Ammons gives this grief its largest expression:

I stand on the stump  
 of a child, whether myself  
 or my little brother who died, and  
 yell as far as I can, I cannot leave this place, for  
 for me it is the dearest and the worst,  
 it is life nearest to life which is

life lost: it is my place where  
I must stand and fail,  
calling attention with tears  
to the branches not lofting  
boughs into space, to the barren  
air that holds the world that was my world

The farm and the surrounding countryside is a landscape steeped in love and loss, memory and grief, and we can hardly wonder that Ammons chose to visit it so seldom in his poems. Each time he did, the pain of the encounter nearly overwhelmed him.

While the farm for Ammons was forever haunted by the ghosts of beloved people and animals, its most basic constituent was the earth itself, the ground upon which he and his family labored and from which they gained their sustenance. In one of his last poems, "Core Sample," a long, narrow rumination typed, like many of his longer poems, on adding machine tape, he makes a final pilgrimage to the farm, this time to commune directly with his native soil:

. . . youth, for  
me, was tools and  
the ground: the  
ground was an  
overwhelming  
presence & potential  
and the skinny  
tools, the rakes,  
hoes, plows, axes,  
mauls were riddled  
of the ground: I  
worked the soil,  
and the heavens  
held or gave rain,  
winds slashed or  
cooled the squash  
plants, hail pocked  
or sizzled weeds  
or baccer leaves:  
lines of beauty  
run like arteries  
through these many, the  
swoosh of blessings,  
biddies spared  
from the hawk, the  
abominations of  
chicks chilled  
numb by midnight  
storms:

The remembered tools and rhythms of labor melt imperceptibly into an awareness of larger patterns, blessings, and abominations meted out from above. Ground and sky together define the space of possibility for a young farmer struggling to sustain the life around him. Once again, however, the knowledge of loss breaks into the poem:

alas, I  
am such a cut-up  
creature with  
such a love, tho,  
a love, such a  
love for what is  
gone: it doesn't  
feel like sap but  
like wires of  
light drawn out from  
hell,  
fire-spoiled from hellfire

The poet's love for all he has lost feels to him neither heavenly nor nourishing, but infernal in its heat and bondage. No amount of tilling, plowing, or irrigation could ever purge this soil of its memories; and for Ammons those memories burned like hellfire.

In 1944 his father sold the farm and moved the family to the nearby town of Chadbourn. After his discharge from the Navy, Archie attended Wake Forest College, graduating in 1949 with a bachelor's degree in science. He then spent a year as principal of a tiny elementary school in Cape Hatteras, on the Carolina coast. In 1950 Ammons's mother died, an event that seems to have definitively severed his ties to his home country. In an early poem that is the closest thing to an elegy that he wrote for his mother, Ammons envisions a farmland blighted by drought:

The sap is gone out of the trees  
in the land of my birth  
and the branches droop  
The rye is rusty in the fields  
and the oatgrains are light in the wind  
The combine sucks at the fields  
and coughs out dry mottled straw  
The bags of grain are chaffy and light [ . . . ]

The sap is gone out of the hollow straws  
and the marrow out of my bones  
They are  
brittle and dry  
and painful in this land

The fertility and nourishment that had once suffused the land of his birth is gone; and while the poem does not identify the cause of this catastrophe, it's clear that a life-giving maternal principle has been lost. The farm has become a desert, its black earth has turned to dust, and the poet himself has become a desiccated carcass. Shortly after his mother's death Ammons left North Carolina for good, to set out on a journey that took him from California to Ithaca, by way of New Jersey. In one of his earliest published poems, "Some Months Ago," he describes this leave-taking in mythic terms:

I closed up all the natural throats of earth  
and cut my ties with every natural heart  
and saying farewell  
stepped out into the great open

"Natural" here can surely be taken to mean "natal." Having lost the woman who bore him, Ammons was now ready to leave the land that bore him as well.

## 2. The Desert

In later years, Ammons liked to say that as he drove across the arid plains of the American Southwest in 1950, on his way to attend graduate school at U.C. Berkeley, he quickly recognized his spiritual home. In an early poem called "Driving Through," Ammons mythologizes his trip through the desert, explicitly tying it to his inception as a writer:

In the desert midnight I said  
taking out my notebook I  
am astonished  
though widely traveled having  
seen Empire State and Palestine, Texas  
and San Miguel de Allende  
to mention extremes  
and sharpened my pencil on the sole  
of my shoe

The mountains running skidded  
over the icy mirages of the moon  
and fell down tumbling  
laughing for breath  
on the cool dunes  
The stone mosaics of the flattest  
places (parting lake-gifts) grouped  
in colors and  
played games at imagery: a green  
tiger with orange eyes, an Orpheus  
with moving fingers

Fontal the shrubs flooded  
 everything with cool  
 water

I sat down against a brimming smoketree  
 to watch and morning found the  
 desert reserved  
 trembling at its hot and rainless task

Driving through  
 you would never suspect  
 the midnight rite or seeing my lonely house  
 guess it will someday hold  
 laurel and a friend

If his mother's death turned the farm to a parched desert, the actual Southwestern desert here becomes a scene of rebirth and initiation. The poem depicts a kind of ritual preparation to write—notebook opened, pencil sharpened—but not the act of writing itself, of which this poem is presumably the result. Instead we are given the extraordinary nocturnal vision of the middle section, in which the desert landscape does the work of the imagination for the poet, playing “games at imagery,” spewing forth tropes and phantasmagoria like a poetic geyser. As morning breaks, the desert is once again “reserved / trembling at its hot and rainless task,” but the promise of future visions informs the speaker's confident declaration that his “lonely house . . . will someday hold / laurel and a friend.”

As “Driving Through” makes clear, Ammons started out as a visionary poet, drawn more to myth and allegory than to empirical description; and the desert supplied both the catalyst and the primary setting for this early work. Unlike the rich black soil of North Carolina, desert sand does not hold footprints or furrows. Its windblown surface continually erases itself, leaving no trace of past inhabitants. Though a desert is in fact a complex ecosystem, for Ammons's poetic purposes it is essentially blank, a barren space in which elemental encounters can be staged. It is thus an ideal landscape for a poet seeking to reinvent himself and his identity from the ground up. Ammons's first book, *Ommateum*, published by a vanity press in 1955, evokes many landscapes, including marshes, forests, and coasts, but the desert is its dominant setting by a wide measure, at times threatening to swallow up all the others. Though his desert poems contain a few regional references—in one the speaker “hurrie[s] away to a hill in Arizona”—for the most part they place themselves in an indeterminate locale that flickers ambiguously between the American Southwest and a Middle Eastern landscape gleaned from the Bible and other ancient writings. Many of the poems in *Ommateum* portray a solitary wanderer contending with elemental forces. In some poems that figure calls himself Ezra, a name with strongly Biblical resonance, though Ammons later said he took the name from a boyhood friend who was killed in the war.

Ezra's most potent adversary is of course the wind, which plays a part in almost every poem in *Ommateum*. Throughout his career Ammons was endlessly fascinated by the way wind borrows form and substance from its surroundings, embodying itself in water, grass, and dust. Wind marks the meeting place of matter and spirit; shapeless and invisible in itself, it

nevertheless produces tangible effects, nowhere more so than in the desert. In its most spectacular guise, the wind becomes a kind of god striding across the landscape:

This land where whirlwinds  
walking at noon in tall columns of dust  
take stately turns around the desert  
is a very dry land

These giant walkers easily dwarf mere human pedestrians like Ezra, who nevertheless struggles heroically to make his presence among them known. In the famous opening poem of *Ommateum*, the protagonist can barely pronounce his own name:

So I said I am Ezra  
and the wind whipped my throat  
gaming for the sounds of my voice

Faced with such implacable violence, the speaker of these poems makes a crucial decision, choosing to embrace the wind in all its fury rather than to resist it. The clearest statement of this acquiescence comes in a poem entitled “In the Wind My Rescue Is.” Here is the first section of the poem:

In the wind my rescue is  
in whorls of it  
like winged tufts of dreams  
bearing  
through the forms of nothingness  
the gyres and hurricane eyes  
the seed safety  
of multiple origins

Ammons characteristically depicts the wind’s motion as circular rather than linear, lending it an almost womb-like insularity subtly reinforced by the verb “bearing.” What the wind bears is “the seed safety / of multiple origins,” a strange phrase whose knotty syntax defies easy parsing. If this is Ammons’s eccentric variation on the cliché “safety in numbers,” the numbers in question here are more virtual than actual, since “origins” are never clear-cut. To posit multiple origins, whether for wind, seed, or person, is to rescue the mind from the tyranny of monolithic thought. Such thought is represented in the middle section of the poem by an image that recurs almost obsessively in Ammons’s work:

I set it my task  
to gather the stones of earth  
into one place  
the water modeled sand molded stones  
from

the water images  
 of riverbeds in drought  
 from the boundaries of the mind  
 from  
 sloping farms  
 and altitudes of ice and  
 to mount upon the highest stone  
 a cardinal  
 chilled in the attitude of song

The peculiarly human impulse to gather similar objects into one place is here parodied by Ezra's rock pile, at once crude monument and primitive temple. (Note the hidden pun in Ammons's choice of a cardinal as the pile's ornamental bird.) The cold fixity of this structure, as conveyed by words like "ice" and "chilled," stands in sharp contrast to the wind's fluidity, which reasserts itself in the poem's closing section:

But the wind has sown loose dreams  
 in my eyes  
 and telling unknown tongues  
 drawn me out beyond the land's end  
 and rising in long  
 parabolae of bliss  
 borne me safety  
 from all those ungathered stones

Ammons was a lifelong connoisseur of motions, and two of his favorites were gathering and dispersal. If the heaped stones represent a kind of centrifugal force, the wind's energy is centripetal, looping outward in "long / parabolae of bliss." Sorting and accumulating are rational procedures that have their pragmatic use, but dispersal, dissemination, and scattering are what keep both mind and world alive and in motion. This is why the poem ends not with the majestic mound but with "all those ungathered stones," at once a threat to the speaker's mastery and a source of safety, as the deeply ambiguous "from" of the last line suggests. Here it may be helpful to recall the image Ammons called "the most powerful [he had] ever known," his dead brother's footprint and the crude shelter his mother built to preserve it. That image becomes greatly magnified in the vast space of the desert, but the basic impulse to leave some mark on the landscape that can withstand the erosive effects of time is the same. In effect these desert poems explore the rival claims of wind and footprint, granting each its authority.

In one of the last and finest of Ammons's desert poems, "Mansion," written well after the publication of *Ommateum*, the speaker reaches a final rapprochement with the wind:

So it came time  
 for me to cede myself  
 and I chose

the wind  
to be delivered to

The wind was glad  
and said it needed all  
the body  
it could get  
to show its motions with

and wanted to know  
willingly as I hoped it would  
if it could do  
something in return  
to show its gratitude

When the tree of my bones  
rises from the skin I said  
come and whirlwinding  
stroll my dust  
around the plain

so I can see  
how the ocotillo does  
and how saguaro-wren is  
and when you fall  
with evening

fall with me here  
where we can watch  
the closing up of day  
and think how morning breaks

As some of you may recall, my esteemed colleague M. H. Abrams discussed this poem in his Harder lecture a few years ago, and I can hardly hope to better his commentary. I will simply point out that in this poem the speaker has definitively chosen dispersal over gathering, surrendering himself to the wind with a curious faith that it will honor his wish to remain sentient of his surroundings. The landscape is no longer Sumerian but American, as the ocotillo and saguaro-wren attest, which may help explain why the monumentalizing impulse present in other poems has faded. But the poem's title, "Mansion," suggests that a kind of architecture persists, if only in the mind of the speaker, and marks a fundamental shift in the way Ammons conceives the relation between wind and shelter. When the whole of the desert is your mansion, you can let the wind blow your dust about freely, secure in the knowledge that you will always be at home.

### 3. The Shore

In 1952 Ammons left graduate school without completing a degree and moved to southern New Jersey to begin working in his father-in-law's medical glassware business. For the next twelve years he and his wife, Phyllis, resided in Northfield, a few miles from the tidal estuaries and inlets of the South Jersey shore. Ammons soon began exploring this coastal landscape in earnest, and its appearance in his poetry signaled a major departure from the stark desert parables of the *Ommateum* period. In the early 1960s Ammons produced a magnificent series of poems set on the Jersey shore that did much to establish his reputation as an important new poet. Expansive in form, discursive in style, freely exploring both page and landscape, these poems reveal a mind at once hungry for empirical data and quick to extrapolate large principles, in keeping with Ammons's early training as a scientist. The first of these, "Expressions of Sea Level," lent its title to Ammons's second book in 1964. The poem examines the contrast between the encircling monotony of mid-ocean and the broken articulations of the shoreline:

. . . mid-ocean,  
sky sealed unbroken to sea,  
  there is no way to know  
the ocean's speech,  
intervolved and markless,  
breaking against

no boulder-held fingerland:  
broken, surf things are expressions:  
the sea speaks far from its core [ . . . ]

only with the staid land  
is the level conversation really held:  
only in the meeting of rock and  
  sea is  
hard relevance shattered into light:

Ammons's insistence on the link between brokenness and expression may remind us of his early poem "Rack," in which he searches for the pieces of his own voice. The only adequate expression of wholeness may be silence, but in the breaking of surf and wave the sea expresses its partial energies and motions. These are pieces of the ocean's voice, and in attending to them, Ammons is in effect reinventing his poetic quest, turning it away from self and toward the vast otherness of nature (though the two for him are never wholly distinct).

Where the desert had allowed for pure, elemental encounters, the shore presents an intricate array of forces and variables, including those of organic life. A very different epistemology begins to emerge from this landscape, one that respects the inexhaustible complexity of nature while still striving for a poetic vision that can capture the underlying unity of the scene. The next poem in the series, "One:Many," offers a clear statement of Ammons's

project “To maintain balance / between one and many by / keeping in operation both one and many,” then returns to the shore as a kind of testing ground:

when I tried to summarize  
 a moment's events  
 along the creek shore this afternoon,  
 the tide gathering momentum outwardly,  
 terns  
 hovering  
 dropping to spear shallow water,  
 the minnows  
 in a band  
 wavering between deep and shallow water,  
 the sand hissing  
 into new images  
 [ . . . ]  
 when I tried to think by what  
 millions of grains of events  
 the tidal creek had altered course  
 when I considered alone  
 a record  
 of the waves on the running blue creek,  
 I was released into a power beyond my easy failures,  
 released to think  
 how so much freedom  
 can keep the broad look of serenity  
 and nearly storable balance:

Though the effort to “think” all of the events and variables that shape a single moment along the creek shore may be doomed to failure, that failure brings with it a compensatory sense of “release,” permitting a more holistic vision to arise that fully grasps its own incompleteness. Ammons's shore poems alternate between these perspectives, stressing by turns the multifarious complexity and “broad serenity” of the tidal landscape. The most celebrated of Ammons's shore poems is “Corsons Inlet,” the title poem of his third book. Adhering closely to the rhythm and shape of a walk, the poem offers Ammons's richest account of a coastal environment. Its very appearance on the page evokes the uneven, fractal contour of a shoreline:

I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning  
 to the sea,  
 then turned right along  
 the surf  
 rounded a naked headland  
 and returned

along the inlet shore:

Once again a moment of release ensues that grants the poet a more fluid apprehension of his surroundings:

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,  
from the perpendiculars,  
    straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds  
of thought  
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends  
    of sight:

At the heart of the poem lie two sharply contrasting visions of natural energy. As the poet walks along the shore, he turns his head toward the water and sees:

black shoals of mussels exposed to the risk  
of air  
and, earlier, of sun,  
waved in and out with the waterline, waterline inexact,  
caught always in the event of change:  
    a young mottled gull stood free on the shoals  
    and ate  
to vomiting: another gull, squawking possession, cracked a crab,  
picked out the entrails, swallowed the soft-shelled legs, a ruddy  
turnstone running in to snatch leftover bits:

risk is full: every living thing in  
siege: the demand is life, to keep life: the small  
white blacklegged egret, how beautiful, quietly stalks and spears  
    the shallows, darts to shore  
        to stab—what? I couldn't  
see against the black mudflats—a frightened  
fiddler crab?

This horrifying spectacle of nature “red in tooth and claw” quickly gives way to a very different picture:

    the news to my left over the dunes and  
reeds and bayberry clumps was  
    fall: thousands of tree swallows  
    gathering for flight:  
    an order held  
    in constant change: a congregation  
rich with entropy: nevertheless, separable, noticeable  
    as one event,  
    not chaos:

Violence and congregation are equally manifestations of natural order, and both are present at Corsons Inlet. The volatile nature of these two scenes means that neither can be fully perceived or described; vital details, like the egret's prey or an individual swallow, will inevitably elude the observer's eye. What *can* be perceived is the "event of change" itself, the endlessly complex "working in and out, together / and against of millions of events." This minutely textured vision of reality owes much to the special character of the shore, with its incessant fluctuations and rich ecology.

"Corsons Inlet" famously ends with the speaker's acknowledgment that "I have perceived nothing completely" and that "tomorrow a new walk is a new walk." True to his word, Ammons took another walk the next day, and wrote another poem about it. That poem, "Salience," is very different from "Corsons Inlet," narrower in form and sharper in focus, but it too explores the dynamics of change and constancy along the shore. The poem's first half returns to the basic elements of Ammons's desert poems, evoking a dizzying "dune fest" in which sand and wind play leading roles:

a variable of wind  
among the dunes,  
making variables  
of position and direction and sound  
of every reed leaf  
and bloom,  
running streams of sand,  
winding, rising, at a depression  
falling out into deltas,  
weathering shells with blast,  
striking hiss into clumps of grass

Like any complex equation, the landscape contains constants as well as variables. As the speaker walks toward the sea, he recognizes many old friends:

much seemed  
constant, to be looked  
forward to, expected:  
from the top of a dune rise,  
look of ocean salience: in  
the hollow,  
where a runlet  
makes in  
at full tide and fills a bowl,  
extravagance of pink periwinkle  
along the grassy edge,  
and a blue, bunchy weed, deep blue,  
deep into the mind the dark blue  
constant.

But one key presence in “Corsons Inlet,” the congregation of swallows, has now departed, prompting a final meditation on transience and permanence:

desertions of swallows  
 that yesterday  
 ravaged air, bush, reed, attention  
 in gatherings wide as this neck of dunes:  
 now, not a sound  
 or shadow, no trace of memory, no remnant  
 explanation: [ . . . ]  
 earth brings to grief  
 much in an hour that sang, leaped, swirled,  
 yet keeps a round  
 quiet turning,  
 beyond loss or gain,  
 beyond concern for the separate reach.

Ammons characteristically frames his thoughts in terms of motion, contrasting the leaping and swirling of individual organisms with the round, quiet turning of the larger system that contains them. In the final poem of the series, “February Beach,” Ammons returns to the shore in the dead of winter, when the dunes have frozen and all motion has crawled to a standstill. Even here he detects a latent energy in the scene, a “clamoring and / coming on” that will fulfill itself in the spring thaw. For Ammons the shore is less a landscape than an *event*, a place where no two moments are ever the same, and where a new walk is always a new walk.

#### 4. The Backyard

In 1963 Ammons was invited to give a reading at Cornell, and a year later he was offered an appointment as a visiting instructor. On being promoted to assistant professor in 1966, he and his wife purchased the white colonial house in Cayuga Heights where they would spend the next twenty-five years. While the poems Ammons wrote after moving to Ithaca are full of creeks, waterfalls, and other local landmarks, their most consistent point of reference is the backyard of 606 Hanshaw Road. Its elm and maple trees, quince and holly bushes, zinnias and zucchini blossoms, squirrels and caterpillars all became familiar characters to Ammons’s readers; as one critic put it, “Never before has the abundance of a backyard entered into such a mutually productive relationship with poetry.” Neither as incalculably complex as the shore nor as elementally stark as the desert, the backyard is an artificially closed environment that allows natural processes to be contemplated over the course of months and years. In many respects the yard resembles a small-scale version of the farm. Both are cultivated landscapes that require significant labor to maintain, and both become deeply entwined with home and family. But there are clear differences between them as well. Ammons’s memories of the farm were bound up with his sense of himself as a boy and youth, uncertain of his prospects and entirely dependent for his livelihood on the land.

By the time he arrived on Hanshaw Road, he was not only an established poet but a professor, rewarded for his powers of contemplation and expression. Ammons's backyard thus served him chiefly as an object of study, a kind of laboratory for thought experiments. Though he often recorded his hands-on engagement with the landscape in the form of weeding, raking, and other yard work, he spent considerably more time gazing at it from the window of the second-floor study where he composed most of his poems. There he harvested a very different crop from the tobacco and strawberries of the old farm.

For Ammons the backyard is not mere matter, but a densely written text that can never be fully deciphered. "In my yard's more wordage than I / can read," he writes in one poem. Every insect, every leaf, every bird dropping is a word pregnant with manifold implications. This density of meaning insures that the poet can take in the whole of creation while keeping his gaze trained on a single acre of land. The principle of the microcosm, of great things contained in small, governs Ammons's running meditation on his backyard. "Some universe comes here to my yard every day or so," he observes in his long poem "Hibernaculum," "and bursts / into a fly standing, with six little dents, on water." Another passage from that poem offers an exact measurement of the Ammonsian universe:

. . . I write not very wide, just to the fence or hedge  
around the lot (sometimes from my window I take in the

neighboring lady's scrap of woods—I hope she  
doesn't get word and charge me) but of course I write  
straight up and down as far either way as I can reach,

[ . . . ]  
it's world enough to take my time, stretch my reason, hinder  
and free me:

Ammons's playful revision of Andrew Marvell's lament "Had we but world enough and time" suggests that an inquisitive mind can find all the world it needs between the house and the back fence. As a sample of the cosmos, the backyard may seem absurdly narrow, yet its vertical range, from solid ground to airy height, invests all its objects with immensity.

Some of those objects get singled out for special attention in Ammons's poetry. A large elm tree plays a leading role in his backyard meditations. At one point Ammons even entertains the idea of devoting a whole book to it:

I was thinking last  
June, so multiple and dense is the reality of a tree, that I  
  
ought to do a booklength piece on the elm in the backyard here:

These lines come from "Essay on Poetics," a long poem exploring the parallels between poetic and natural principles of organization. For Ammons the elm tree exemplifies the synthesis

of unity and multiplicity, one and many, that he strives to achieve in his poems. A stable, recognizable landmark that “enters / the ground at a fairly reliable point” (303), the tree is nonetheless made up of “twelve quintillion cells” (308), in each of which “more takes place by way / of event, disposition, and such [ . . . ] than any computer / we now have could keep registration of” (308). Ammons’s poetic tour of the elm goes on to consider the mathematics of branches and foliage, the behavior of seedpods, and the complex role of elmworms in the tree’s ecology. While Ammons never produced the book-length study he had contemplated, he returned repeatedly to the elm tree in later poems. In “Extremes and Moderations,” another verse-essay, he ponders the significance of dead branches that break off and become lodged in the tree’s lower boughs, finding in these a parable of the relationship between the living and the dead in human culture. Given the apparent intimacy between poet and tree, it comes as a surprise to learn in Ammons’s 1977 book *The Snow Poems* that he glimpses only a small part of it from his study window:

I can see but little,  
 and that with much leaning,  
 of the elm from this window and  
 indeed no part of that attached to the  
 ground but outbuoyed branches only,  
 mostly tips [ . . . ]  
     if I worked in the other room  
     next to the elm  
     (a winter-sunny room)  
     I’d get to know more about  
     the elm  
     but so much more would dominate  
     the poem:

Ammons’s emphasis on his limited view of the tree reflects the more subjective and skeptical tone of *The Snow Poems*, which abjures the essay-like authority of previous poems. The second part of the passage can be taken as a sly joke; since the elm tree already plays such a dominant part in Ammons’s poetry, it’s hard to imagine how much more of it there might be had he worked in a room with a full view.

Another prominent backyard resident in Ammons’s poems is the quince bush, which enjoys a more volatile, even violent relation to its environment than the elm tree.

A short poem called “The Quince Bush” begins “The flowering quince bush / on the back hedge has been / run through by a morning / glory vine,” and goes on to see in this image an emblem of hostility and struggle in the human sphere. But if the quince is vulnerable to the parasitic onslaught of the morning glory, it also harbors its own will to power, as a passage from Ammons’s long poem *Sphere* suggests:

. . . even though the bush  
 has put on the strain of blossoming and fruiting, it has

at the same time shot out shoots all over, threatening the

upcoming hollyhock and lemon lilies: a green rage to possess,  
make and take room: to dominate, shade out, whiten: I  
identify with the bush's rage, its quiet, ruthless, outward

thrust: whatever nears me must shrink, wither up, or widen  
overlarge and thin with shade, ambition the size of the room  
I need to unfold into: but cunning and deviousness are at

work at the quince bush: morning glory stock is underground,  
ready to shoot up a spear of leaving through the quince's  
underbrush and by fast moving to overcrown the bush tops  
and take the light away: look at the smooth-cut lawn, how  
even and gentle: but finger through the turf, the nap,  
and there are the brown twists of clover, veronica, plantain,

grass in a striving: it is hard to stand up crowding full  
into a full unfolding: being's terror:

All the rapacity that Ammons beheld on the shore at Corsons Inlet can also be found within the seemingly pastoral enclave of the backyard, as rival plants compete for precious light and soil. Ammons feels a special bond with the quince bush, whose rage to expand and possess resonates with his own ambition to unfold into as much space as he needs. But this expansive urge is threatened from within by a lurking enemy, the morning glory waiting to strike. Even the grass, Whitman's symbol of democratic community, proves on close inspection to be a scene of struggle. Ammons sums up the spectacle in a bitingly concise phrase whose grammar hovers between possessive and declarative: "being's terror." This is hardly the lesson most people would derive from the sight of a peaceful suburban backyard, but Ammons always refused to sentimentalize nature in any form. We last see the quince bush in *The Snow Poems*, where it meets a violent end at the hands of the poet himself:

I cut the quince down the other day into so  
many stalks it all made a big bundle  
upon the lawn high as my head I'd say

Given Ammons's strong identification with the quince bush, it's tempting to suppose that in dismantling it he is symbolically cutting himself down to size as well, curtailing his own expansive energies in keeping with the more broken aesthetic of *The Snow Poems*. On the other hand, he may just have gotten tired of trimming the damn thing.

Mayhem in the backyard is not confined to the vegetable kingdom, of course. "The wildlife around here sometimes gets to be / *pretty wild*," Ammons observes in his long poem *Garbage*, before describing the predatory activities of a neighborhood cat who sometimes visits the backyard:

well, there's one *chipmunk* you won't see  
streaking around here anymore, plunging into

cement holes by the back steps or into ground  
holes by the hydrangea or scrambling into the

crack under the middle post of the garage:  
because (this is late the same day) I just saw

tabby walking away with him in his mouth: not  
a white longhair, not an abyssinian, not a

calico, not a chat, but tabby, putting the  
chipmunk down by the day-lilies, hardly yet having

their days, on the back hedge and then in  
thrusting gulps and crunches downing chippy:

Contemplating this bloody scene, Ammons characteristically wavers between stoicism  
and sorrow, identifying by turns with the cat's hunger and the chipmunk's innocence:

. . . I'm  
a little shook up about the chipmunk: the other

day just before sunset, I watched him for  
several minutes as he sat near the steps on the

backporch in the full sun and looked around a  
bit now and then with an, taking in an, unprecedented

leisure and pleasure, the sunlight nearly coming  
clear pink through his ears and forefeet:

But this moment of serenity proves fleeting. Terror is as pervasive for animals as for  
plants, as Ammons acknowledges in considering another backyard visitor:

. . . the  
rabbit knows that if he doesn't like it here he  
can't just go off somewhere else to live: so

he carefully dissolves from panic and nibbles  
a sprig of weed, eases into a forward move,

and *lives in fear*: not helplessly, but in the

knowledge of his capabilities, his devices, his

bounces and split swerves: and he has young to  
beget and young to raise and this without

benefit of tenure, estate, living trust, term  
insurance, or social security: he is naked every

minute to clover tip or onslaught; onslaught  
here meaning being chewed up:

There is a touch of envy in these lines as well as dread. The rabbit's total vulnerability grants it a degree of presence in the moment that humans, with their elaborate social and economic arrangements, seldom experience. But the price of that presence is constant fear. Between the marauding cat and the raging quince bush, Ammons's backyard can seem more like a war zone than a garden. 606 Hanshaw Road is currently owned by my colleague Barbara Correll, and I'd just like to say to Barbara, watch yourself: it's a jungle back there.

In 1992 the Ammonses moved to Cayuga Heights Road. The poet was no longer able to do much gardening, and while his new house had a pleasant yard, he never really became intimate with it, judging from the poems he wrote in the '90s. The local scene that replaces the backyard in Ammons's late work is the Ithaca Farmer's Market, which makes memorable appearances in the long poems *Garbage* and *Glare*. I don't have time to quote those passages in full; let me just suggest that in the Farmer's Market, Ammons at last seems to have found a place from which violence and strife have been excluded, where natural and human energies mingle peacefully, and where suffering and loss, while never entirely absent, recede into the background. "This is we at our best," he writes in *Garbage*,

. . . not killing, scheming, abusing,  
running over, tearing down, burning up: why

did invention ever bother with all this, why  
does the huge beech by the water come back every

year:

In some respects the Farmer's Market is simply an extension of the poet's backyard; but of course it hearkens back to the old North Carolina farm as well. In these beautiful passages, with their communal warmth and sensual enjoyment, we feel, almost for the first time in his poetry, that Ammons is truly at home.

In a 1998 interview with the critic Stephen Schneider, Ammons offered a retrospective map of his poetic journey:

It seems to me that there has been a tendency in my work that the chief presence in the early poems is the wind. Somewhere along the way it becomes water. [. . .] And then it becomes mineral or earth, and it seems to me that my own forms of anxiety, or hysteria, or whatever, have grown closer and closer to the ground through the years. [. . .] It is really kind of an astonishing pilgrimage from the wind to the earth.

This elemental progression clearly parallels the scenic movement I've tried to outline today, from the wind-swept desert to the Jersey shore to the backyard in Ithaca. Behind all of these landscapes hovers the memory of the Whiteville farm, a scene that appears infrequently in Ammons's poems but whose emotional resonance can nearly always be felt, a complex layering of love and pain. Each of these environments contributes crucial images and energies to Ammons's poetry, allowing him to move in new directions and to find new pieces of his voice. Yet for all his attachment to these and other places, and to the earth itself, Ammons harbored an essential ambivalence to the very idea of place. If his poetry testifies to the inexhaustible richness of places, it also proclaims that we are more than the places we inhabit.