

Poetry in Built Spaces

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Introduction

The spaces we live in shape us. Built spaces like cafes, bookstores, or houses are functional, but are also able to carry significance for us, be it cultural, aesthetic, or based on personal experiences. Inspired by the multitude of poetry praising the great outdoors, I wanted to explore praising built spaces through poetry. This paper includes analysis of built-space-based poetry, including some of my own.

Most poetry written about spaces is based on natural landscapes. There are some good reasons for this: several poetic movement and genres explicitly center nature (Examples: Transcendentalism, Romantic era, haikus, nature poetry, and ecopoetry), “nature” encompasses a lot of spaces, and outdoor spaces are common across all time periods. While I do like a lot of this poetry, I sometimes find that I am not able to connect well with poetry based in nature. Two years ago, I read a lot of Transcendentalist poetry¹, a focus of which is the divinity of nature, and I was inspired to write and seek out poetry that portrays the divinity that can be found in everyday, built spaces.

When it comes to my own poetry here, I wanted to focus more on the ideas, flow, and process than the final result. Therefore, the original poetry included here are still works in progress, with explanations of the motivations, what I did to get there, and changes that could be made.

The Bookshop on Lafayette Street

The first place I chose to focus on is my family bookstore, the passionate pursuit of one of my favorite creatives: my dad, Eric Maywar. Classics Books and Gifts (a/k/a Classics Used and Rare Books, a/k/a Classics Used Bookstore, formerly known as The Book Cellar) has served the Trenton NJ community as its only bookstore for as long as I have memories. I visited the store on a trip home to get inspiration for this study. In this chapter, I have recounted my own personal experience with the magic of bookstores, analyzed a bookstore-based poem, and written one of my own.

Growing up, I always knew the value of a good book. Reading is usually a solitary experience, but the bookstore provided a location for people of all stripes to browse

¹ A movement in New England in the 1820s and 1830s based on the three main values of individualism, idealism, and the divinity of nature.

the shelves to try out different stories, sit and read for a bit, ask for a recommendation, or gather with other community members to discuss books, read poetry, or even play games. Bookstores can also inspire art themselves: My dad created a collection of poetry and short stories about bookstores that I thought would be appropriate to re-read for this study.

I was inspired to turn the story of the creation of this collection into a poem of its own. My hope here is that you as the reader are able to really experience this story and feel the magic of serendipity, passion, and of course— bookstores.

writing 'the bookstore on Lafayette Street'

By Nia Maywar

*My dad is always working on some shiny new idea. He can
often be found in an old brain-child of his: a big man
stuck, slightly slouching in the center of an*

*orderly disordered page-filled maze.
Grew from a story writing kid who, rightly,
never grew out of his story writing phase.*

*He was sketching out something special, then
had a visit from a new epic-poem writing friend.
Who said:*

"My next adventure takes place in your bookstore".

*And, what do you know? That brings our count of
bookstore-based tales up to two. And so, this collection was conceived.
Reached out to a few more and the count became
four... seven... ten. fourteen, nineteen².*

This poem is somewhat musical, though it doesn't have a strict structure. Stanzas are grouped by rhyming scheme: The first stanza uses enjambment to help with the pacing of the first couple sentences. I also used alliteration to give the beginning of the poem a tongue-twister-y sound: "stuck, slightly slouching in the center of an \ orderly disordered".

This poem became, partially, a tribute to my father. I wanted to portray him as a creative and imaginative person always pursuing new ideas. Expanding out from my dad, I make the setting of the poem his bookstore, by saying he's "in an old brain-child of his" "the

² The book has nineteen poems and short stories.

center of an \ orderly disordered page-filled maze”. In addition to giving my dad ownership over the space he’s in, the use of the phrase "old brain-child" reinforces the idea that my dad is constantly creating and nurturing new ideas. The second stanza reinforces the concept that he is the type of person to always be working on something, even from childhood. This stanza lets the reader know that the types of projects he works on are often literature based.

The poem takes a turn with the introduction of the poet. The poet's declaration that "My next adventure takes place in your bookstore" sets off a chain reaction, as my father begins to reach out to other creatives for stories to accompany the first two: “Reached out to a few more and the count became \ four...”. The phrase "And, what do you know?" emphasizes the sense of surprise and delight at the growing collection of bookstore-based tales. The poem ends with a sense of momentum and possibility, as the collection of stories expands from two to nineteen.

I wanted my poem to celebrate the power of imagination and the joy of creative collaboration. Going forward, I would try to make this poem more descriptive so that the setting could be more clear, even without the context. I took the following poem as a good example of how to draw the reader into the setting of a poem using descriptive language.

This poem from the collection by Trenton teacher Doc Long titled ‘At Classics Books’ does a good job of immersing the reader in the atmosphere of a bookstore.

At Classics Books

Doc Long

*Old bookstore *Wise silence*

The overfed cat napping on the windowsill

Specks of dust ride lasers of light

Stillness haunted in an unseen world

*Open any book and the sulk of wine and incense
all the way from Dakar or Tashkent**

Subversive revolutionary Things hidden
in the name of freedom * Music* Is that music**

*Bebop walking down the street dancing reading
a book* The cat yawns goes back to sleep **

*Small town *Saturday afternoon**
*Planets swarming in silver light**

The poem is a brief meditation on the experience of visiting an old bookstore. I want to note that the bookstore described here is not Classics Books (despite the name). Classics does not have cats, but I recognize that cats are a common element of a bookstore environment and I love the inclusion of this detail here. The language used in this poem is both creative and effective. Dust might not be able to “ride lasers of light”, but when reading this phrase, you can immediately see this picture in your mind’s eye. The verb “ride” also brings a small bit of motion to juxtapose the “stillness” described in the next line. The phrase “wise silence” suggests a sense of reverence for the bookstore and the books (knowledge) stored within it.

The poem then turns to the idea that books are portals to other places and times. The speaker suggests that opening any book in the store can transport the reader to far-off lands, such as Dakar or Tashkent, and uses sound, smell, touch, and taste to bring these locations to life.

The second-to-last stanza returns to the physical space of the bookstore, and is able to beautifully transition from the music from the book universe, to “Bebop walking down the street dancing reading”. Bebop is a very musical name, and linking the action of dancing, which often requires music, to reading. This transition also serves to conflate the words being read on the page to music, which is another way the author uses descriptive language to creatively express the feeling of getting into a good book.

In the last stanza, the author gives us more context to the setting of this bookstore (it’s in a small town), but expands out to “planets swarming in silver light” to portray a sense of wonder and possibility. The last line can also double as a metaphor for the books in the bookstore, describing the universe held in each book as a “planet” and linking the final line to the third line, which tells us that there are “lasers of light” in the bookstore.

After Poems and My Own Bookstore Poem

Knowing about the multitude of poetry already written about spaces, I looked for some to inspire my own bookstore poetry. An “after-poem” is defined as “a poem in homage to, in conversation with, or inspired by another poem”[3]. The concept of an “After-poem” was compelling to me in this context because it enabled me to take a poem that represents the emotions I’m looking for using a representative poem as a direct blueprint. I am also able to directly contrast my poem and the “before” poem to show what can happen when the subject changes.

Caroline Sturgis Tappan's poem 'You go to the woods' has a delightful inquisitive tone about a space. In it, Tappan places the reader in the woods and describes what they see there. She follows the description with rhetorical questions that highlight the unknowable majesty of the outdoors. There are real scientific answers to the questions posed in her poem, but that isn't the point. The point is that we will never be able to really understand nature's motivations.

'You go to the woods'

By Caroline Sturgis Tappan (1819–1888)

*YOU go to the woods—what there have you seen?
Quivering leaves glossy and green;
Lights and shadows dance to and fro,
Beautiful flowers in the soft moss grow.
Is the secret of these things known to you?
Can you tell what gives the flower its hue?
Why the oak spreads out its limbs so wide?
And the graceful grape-vine grows by its side?
Why clouds full of sunshine are piled on high?
What sends the wind to sweep through the sky?
No! the secret of Nature I do not know—
A poor groping child, through her marvels I go!*

Here, I try to capture the emotion behind Tappan's work.

With the addition of books, I try to map universal human emotions and experiences to well-known stories that could be found in a bookstore using phrases/ references the general audience member would be able to find/ search.

'You go to a bookstore'

By Nia Maywar (2023)

After 'You go to the woods'

*You go a bookstore – and what do you find?
Grand wooden cases with stories inside;
An eclectic grouping of tchotchkes and tables,
Surround and support your favorite adventures and fables.
But do you understand what gives them life?
The distrust between households, both alike³?
The power of justice, heartbreak, and grief?*

³ This is a reference to the opening line of the play *Romeo and Juliet*: "Two households, both alike in dignity"

*The reason the public would trust a green thief⁴?
Why vanilla hints can be found on old pages⁵?
And how Atlas shrugging can affect real wages⁶?
Yes, but it's something we know deep inside,
The power of this place where humanity confides.*

The central theme of this poem is that there is something inherent in the human experience that allows us to appreciate the power and significance of books. The bookstore (with its cases and tables) serves as the container of these impactful objects. The closing line, "The power of this place where humanity confides," suggests that bookstores are a sacred space where people can come to share and connect through the stories and knowledge found within them.

[home]

One of the most universal places since the beginning of time has been 'home'. No matter the form of this place (apartment, house, commune, yurt), people are usually able to connect with a place that makes them feel at 'home'-- home being a distinct feeling that isn't necessarily connected to the type of dwelling, but instead connected to the warmth and safety that dwelling can provide.

While my normal poetic process involves researching different elements of the poem, down to each specific word, to ensure that it's the right fit for the poem in multiple ways, I pushed myself to look inward entirely and make this poem entirely about my own experience in a space that I have cultivated for myself: my dorm room. I thought about the material things that made my room uniquely mine, and I thought about the experiences that really make it a 'home'.

When I was a first year, I maintained a distinction between my 'home' back in New Jersey and 'school' or 'the dorm'. I specifically remember driving to Olin from a day in the city in my first year. The person who drove said something like 'all right, it's time to head home'. There was a millisecond where I was confused. I don't know why that simple sentence made me pause like it did, but I remember it as the first time anyone

⁴ This is a reference to the legendary character Robin Hood, who has been the subject of many books.

⁵ "Lignin, which is present in all wood-based paper, is closely related to vanillin. As it breaks down, the lignin grants old books that faint vanilla scent." Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2013/06/19/the-science-of-the-smell-of-books/#:~:text=A%20common%20smell%20of%20old,books%20that%20faint%20vanilla%20scent.%E2%80%9D>

⁶ *Atlas Shrugged* is a novel written by Ayn Rand, where US government regulations make businesses suffer and therefore creates a dystopia. It is an influential book that upholds the ideals of self-interest over collectivism and "has become a cornerstone of pro-liberty literature". Source: <https://studentsforliberty.org/blog/atlas-shrugged-a-masterpiece-with-a-lasting-impact/#:~:text=Since%20its%20publication%2C%20Atlas%20Shrugged.and%20the%20whims%20of%20collectivism>.

had referred to Olin as 'home' before. I don't remember the first time I did that, but I noticed that at some point I started calling Olin 'home' too.

[home]

By Nia Maywar

*Because I cannot seek out friends
I gladly wait for summer's end
To build a bond that lasts a year
You can see what I mean here:*

*The cycle begins and spirits are high
And stories are told about events in July
Through the windows leaves start turning
While this year's students start stirring*

*She floated up to the third floor
And her hands drifted to the door.
She took a look at those plain walls
Did not ignore those creative calls*

*Tea and all of her favorite mugs'
Drawings-charms-tulle and patterned rugs'
Pin boards filled up with memories'
Could change the tone of what was seen.*

*When guests came and knocked on the door,
Shoes piled on the foyer floor.
And talk, songs, and laughs filled the air,
That's one glimpse of what happened here.*

*She would leave for the fun unknown,
But going back said "coming home".
She'd always find a favorite treat,
And have a place to rest her feet.*

*April and May come by so fast,
I know my time with her can't last.
The boxes slowly pile high,
I wish that I could say 'goodbye'.*

*I saw her looking through the door
That doesn't belong to her anymore
And through her phone said "here I come"!
I'll have to find another one*

*I'm naked, cleaned, pulled-back, stripped bare
You couldn't guess what happened here
What now is cold used to be warm
But now she's turned this home a dorm*

"[home]" tells the story of a year of college from the perspective of the dorm room. The dorm eagerly awaits the end of the summer so that it can have the opportunity to create another year-long bond. The dorm wants the reader to see the joy and warmth its new resident is able to bring to it. Guests come and go, and the air is filled with talk, songs, and laughter. The narrator notes that going back to this home always feels like "coming home," and there is a sense of comfort and belonging there for the resident.

The turn in this poem happens when the dorm recognizes that the school year is coming to an end. Boxes are piling up, and the person is preparing to move out, leaving the home that was once warm and inviting now feeling cold and empty. The dorm wishes it could say goodbye, but it is not able to talk. The last line brings the poem back to the beginning, when it was not yet a home for the student living there.

My hope with this poem was to evoke a sense of nostalgia and loss as the dorm room reflects on the memories and experiences shared with this person who has now moved on. It also touches on themes of home, belonging, and the passage of time.

Solitary Call

The following poem describes a built space being used for something other than its intended purpose, while still providing a necessary space to an individual.

*Classroom Haven
By Nia Maywar*

*You don't go to a classroom to be alone
That 's where people gather to learn things they don't know.*

*Even though if when you look for me
when I need a secluded place to be*

*I might be found
Headphones-on-to-block-out-sound.*

*hunch backed, underneath Fluorescent lighting,
Eyes glued fast to a screen while I'm typing.*

*Empty chairs and darkened halls
Satisfying solitary calls.*

*I can tell that the room is just a bit colder
Than after class shuffles in, shoulder to shoulder.*

*And the boards are filled with cute little sketches
Snuck into the day between all the lessons.*

*My belongings across an entire table and spreading
Lights set to my own dimness setting.*

*I guess this location makes sense after all
And so I know how to satisfy this solitary call.*

“Classroom Haven” explores the idea of finding solitude in a classroom setting. The poem begins by acknowledging that a classroom is not typically associated with solitude, but rather a place where people come together to learn. The poem is structured in a way that emphasizes the contrast between the busy, communal atmosphere of a classroom and the speaker's own need for solitude. The first two lines serve as an introduction, setting up the expectation that a classroom is a place where people gather to learn. The next two lines, however, subvert this expectation by suggesting that the speaker is looking for something different - a place to be alone.

I tried out different titles for this poem. I changed the title from “Solitary Call” to “Classroom Haven” because I think the latter embodies the spirit of the poem much better. Other title names I considered include “Unsuspecting Refuge”, “Unexpected Haven”, “After-Hours: Ours”, and “Where You Least Expect”. I may revisit these titles.

The speaker goes on to describe their current set-up in the classroom: hunched over a screen, wearing headphones to block out noise, and surrounded by empty chairs and darkened halls. The use of sensory details like "Fluorescent lighting" and "eyes glued fast to a screen while I'm typing" create a vivid image of the speaker's solitary space.

The poem also plays with the idea of ownership and control. The speaker's belongings spread across an entire table and the lights set to their own dimness setting suggest that they have taken control of the space around them, making it their own. This sense of ownership is further emphasized by the contrast between the solitary scene described by the speaker and the typical bustling atmosphere of a classroom, which is characterized by "class shuffles in, shoulder to shoulder".

Though it wasn't my initial intention, I believe "Classroom Haven" is a reflection on the importance of finding solitude in unexpected places. The poem encourages readers to consider the possibility that even communal spaces like classrooms can offer moments of seclusion and introspection if we learn to make them our own.

Conclusion

"writing 'the bookstore on Lafayette Street'" was an interesting poem because I did not plan to write it. I was organically inspired by the story of the creation of my dad's book. It is unique from the other poems in this paper because the subject is not really the space it takes place in (though in a final version of the poem, I do plan to include more descriptive language about the bookstore). Despite not being expressly about the setting, I still think this poem does a good job of expressing the magic of a bookstore: an inspiring and serendipitous place.

"At Classics Books" was a great example of descriptive writing (something I believe was lacking from "writing 'the bookstore on Lafayette Street'"). It was awesome to be able to read another bookstore-based poem to compare to the two I wrote.

Writing "You go to a bookstore" allowed me to take a poem with an attitude I wanted to emulate and use it as a direct blueprint for my own poem on another topic. I think this was good practice for me because sometimes I think that my original poems become too similar in tone and rhythm. It was nice to experiment with writing poetry in a different style.

During my exhibit, "Solitary Call" and "[home]" were the two poems people consistently said they preferred. (Someone even took a picture of "[home]". I thought it was sweet that someone wanted to be able to read it again later.) My hope is that this is because I was able to accurately describe experiences that are common to students on our campus, and people were able to connect with them well. For "[home]", I think I reached my goal of evoking a sense of nostalgia and loss as the dorm room reflects on the memories and experiences shared with this person who has now moved on.

Writing out the intentions, motivations, and references I was trying to include in my poetry allowed me to reflect on how effective my poems were and improve them. I think

that this process of writing a poem and then explicitly explaining what I was trying to do may be a strategy I deploy to help my writing in the future. I was also able to more clearly understand the commonality between these three spaces that inspired me to write about them: the sense of belonging and comfort that someone can find in a place they feel is “their own”, even if the space is temporary.

I hope this paper demonstrates the beauty and value of built spaces and how they can be celebrated through the art of poetry.

Bibliography

[1] *The Bookshop on Lafayette Street: Stories and Poems* by Eric Maywar (Editor), Doc Long (Contributor), Yusef Komunyakaa (Contributor)

[2] “You go to the woods” by Caroline Sturgis Tappan

[3] *Happily Ever After-Poem* by Ginger Ayla