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“Plains Light”  
Approx. 600 Words

## Plains Light

The notion that one’s region has an artistic influence has always seemed obvious to me, although it’s hard to say exactly what that means. There’s no trace of Idaho in Pound’s poems, but he’s clearly exceptional. I do think we can hardly imagine the world except as the landscape (or cityscape) where our experience takes place. On the other hand, most poets resist being limited by a place. A friend of mine (an excellent poet) once mentioned a reviewer who referred to him as “one of the finest local poets around,” a comment my friend answered with an acid letter “telling him just how local I think I am.” The aim, after all, is transcendence—if only in the narrow sense of reaching readers far in the future. Who wants to be pigeonholed by some regionalist credo?

On the other hand, once one admits the possibility of such influence, it seems to rise up everywhere.

I’ve lived nearly all my life on the western margin of the plains, between the gnarled wall of the Rockies and the Colorado flatlands, and certain images in my work are clearly rooted in

this circumstance. In fact, among the first lines I ever wrote that still seem like authentic poetry to me are these:

Small lakes on the eastern plains  
drink the sky's blue  
and reflections of eagles hunt in the depths.

My sense of the plains is evident here. They embody a dynamic unification of earth and sky, depth and height, image and reality—and a raw animism that's about as close as I come to religion.

There's another dimension of influence as well. Not so many years ago, my father needed to steer his car off the paved road and jounce across two or three miles of burdock and tallgrass to reach the house my grandmother grew up in; it was more a shack than a house, and more or less ruined by decades of brutal prairie weather. A few years from now, if it hasn't happened already, the site will doubtless contain a Wal-Mart or a strip mall, the way the Clear Creek orchards I used to view from my childhood treehouse have been replaced by highway access ramps and self-storage facilities. And there's always Sand Creek and its bleak massacre site, which Louis Simpson once called “a swept corner of the American consciousness.” The plains, I mean to say, are also about loss—which may explain why my poems so often register a kind of floating grief that has no roots in my personal history.

Beyond particular images and historical events, though, the influence may be strongest in my way of seeing. *Plains light*. I have to admit I aspire to it. I mean that in poems I work very hard to register how gravel at noon is smoothness, but all shadow-casting jaggedness at sunset. (These, as Stevens wrote, are merely instances.) Plains light can make even the plainest details

hallucinogenic (only the light in the desert Southwest has a similar effect, as far as I've seen), so surrealism here is a redundancy, and the baroque classicism of the so-called New Formalists is equally beside the point. In my case, the influence shows in a striving for clarity above all, but not at the expense of honest complexity. I despise those bland accounts of near-death sailing “into the Light.” Light is not always benign: it blinds as often as it offers revelation. Anyone who's ever looked into the plains knows this.

You could almost make a credo of it: *Plains light, plain speech*. That's one I think I could live with.