1.24.09

Dear Berkshire Taconic and the Amy Clampitt Fund,

Thank you for inviting me to be your guest in the Berkshires these last six months. While any residency is important — how wonderful, that other people would offer me time and money to work in a beautiful setting, because they care about my artistic development — the Clampitt residency is special.

Thank you, most of all, for the gift of letting me stay in Amy's house. I liked being among her furniture, art, and letters. Over the last six months, I have puzzled over her notes in the margins of books and her slips of paper marking her place. I've found old matchbooks and sewing kits from New York City in kitchen drawers, and a passport belonging to Harold's father. My favorite coffee cup was a little pottery one she must have brought back from Mexico. I doubt I will ever again have the chance to live that intimately with another poet's things.

I was grateful for the cultural and outdoor opportunities the area affords. This was the first time I'd spent a significant amount of time in nature, and I used part of my residency to learn where I was and what I was looking at — given Clampitt's love of nature, it seemed the right thing to do. I invited nature writer Bill Roorbach over from Holy Cross in Worcester, and from him I learned about mushrooms and conks, hemlocks and oven birds. In the process, I learned what a good scholar of place Robert Frost was. The trees and birds in Frost's poems often didn't exist in the Midwest where I grew up, so when I read his poems in school, I assumed that poets wrote about an idealized, imaginary world. I further realized this fall, while walking up Old Stockbridge Road one day, that the reproductions of Hudson River Valley School paintings in various living rooms of my childhood also depicted a real place, and it was this one. That sounds embarrassingly obvious now. But I loved spending the last six months living in the real-life landscape of the first poems and paintings I knew.

And I liked that I actually *lived somewhere*, in a house with a working kitchen and a mailbox, not in a colony, but in a community. This has been the most comfortable residency I ever had: I slept deep sleep, read on comfy couches, and grew to love the little cherry table in the writing space upstairs. When I ventured out into the community, I could sit behind the counter at The Bookstore and talk to Matt Tannenbaum as we watched the snow fall, and various people came in to say hello. I drank cognac with Karen Chase one afternoon in her living room, and walked poet Leslie Harrison's dogs with her in the Sandisfield National Forest. I watched the inauguration at the Heritage Tavern, elbow to elbow with the residents of Lenox. I felt at home with various editors at the Orion Society, and liked visiting them in their offices in Great Barrington.

These same opportunities made the residency painfully lonely at times. It was hard to be this close to real life and know I was not really building a life here that I could keep. So it isn't a residency for everyone. But I also found that isolation within the community to be one of the residency's strengths, when I had the patience to sit with it instead of fighting it. Sometimes, that isolation was transcendent. I liked learning what lies on the other side of silence. My poems made some abrupt aesthetic shifts over the course of the residency, and I don't know whether that would have happened if the residency had been shorter, or if I would have had more company.

When I came to the house in August, I assumed I'd finish the project I was working on and start another one. I didn't realize until late October that I'd not been thrilled with what I was writing for some time. By the end of my residency, though, the poems I was writing were different from any I'd ever written. I am excited by the new direction the work has taken, and about finishing this revision of my book, which looks nothing like I imagined it looking in August. I know that all of this was made possible by some conversations with Karen Chase, and the help of Amy's big dictionary, and various books on the shelves that led me far and wide. And quiet time, in which I could really hear myself.

I think I would like to return to the area some day, to write about Amy Clampitt. I don't yet know how, or what I'd say, though I don't feel finished with her yet.

Some thoughts for incoming residents: read Clampitt's letters and poems before you arrive; the letters especially make the house come to life in a way that isn't possible otherwise. Learn about the Berkshires before you arrive, too, and make a list of what you'd like to see and do to feed your work, especially if your residency starts in August: I spent my first few weeks getting situated, and hadn't realized how much would shut down after Labor Day. Get your library card at the Lenox Library as soon as possible (they will accept your Clampitt contract as proof of residency) and you can check out museum passes and use their interlibrary loan system.

The generosity of the stipend helped make my stay possible. Thank you for that.

Yours,

Katrina Vandenberg