“Bob Dylan may be the Shakespeare of our time,” says BJ Rolfzen, Dylan’s high school English teacher. Even Shakespeare had parents and a home town. Dylan grew up in Hibbing, Minnesota.

Natalie Goldberg, painter, poet, and well-known writer, travels to Hibbing to examine the soil from which he sprang. Does it matter, she wonders as she heads north on Highway 61, this place that we’re from?

Hibbing is a mining town that took root in the iron-ore rich veins running through northern Minnesota. The mining companies came to supply the needs of the late nineteenth century Industrial Age. The miners came, specialists from Eastern Europe, to work deep underground for the companies. The Jewish merchants, such as Abe and Beatty Zimmerman, came to sell supplies to the miners, setting up clothing and appliance stores along Main Street. By the 1950s, when Bob Zimmerman and his friends were going to school, the ore was running out.

Polka was the music that permeated the daily lives of everyone who lived in Minnesota’s Iron Range. In high school, Bob Zimmerman and his friends John Bucklen and Echo Helstrom, discovered a crack in their small-town universe. Late at night, through the magic of “the skip,” they could tune their radios to the powerful AM stations broadcasting from Louisiana. Little Richard, Muddy Waters, and The Cadillacs entered their lives and, using an early reel-to-reel machine and a microphone, they taped the songs so that they could study the chords on their own guitars. Music became their siren call to another world.

“Some people are just born in the wrong place with the wrong name,” Dylan said recently in an interview. Bob Zimmerman left Hibbing for the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. He fell in with the characters of the Dinkytown music scene of the late fifties. He was introduced to folk music. He soon returned to Hibbing for a visit with a harmonica strapped around his neck talking about the music of Odetta.

“That,” says his friend John Bucklen, “was when I first met Mr. Dylan.”

Hibbing has been slow to recognize its home-grown Shakespeare. Other less enigmatic stars, such as Kevin McHale, seem to be more palatable. In 2005, the second annual celebration of “Dylan Days” was held in Hibbing on the weekend of his birthday, May 24th. Twenty desultory travelers boarded a yellow Hibbing High school bus for the official tour. Natalie, who had launched the weekend’s activities as the keynote speaker at Zimmy’s Café, was among them. When they stop at room 204, The English room at the High School, BJ Rolfzen entertains them with some of his favorite poetry.

“A man who loves literature from the inside out,” Natalie says of BJ. “I had to come to Hibbing to find this.”

Natalie returns to her own home town, Farmingdale, Long Island, as a reference point to her time in Hibbing. She finds the railroad, a way out of town, as it was for Dylan in Hibbing. She finds the bar that her father, Ben Goldberg, owned. She finds the split-level house she grew up in. She finds there is nothing left for her in Farmingdale, that it has all evaporated with the years.

“Home,” she says, “is not the place we think it is.”

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