

Topo-poetics: Poetry and Place

Timothy John Cresswell

Department of English

Royal Holloway University of London

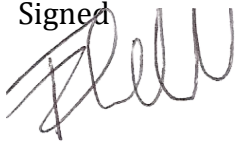
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Declaration of Authorship

I, Timothy John Cresswell, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Cresswell', written over a horizontal line.

Date: 28 July 2015

Abstract

This thesis is a practice-led Creative Writing thesis. The main part of the thesis is a collection of 50 pages of poems that have the themes of place, landscape, belonging, travel and displacement at their heart. These include a selection of poems from my first collection, *Soil* (Pinned in the Margins, 2013), as well as a more recent selection from second collection, *erratic*. The prose section of the thesis submission (37,000 words) consists of a set of essays on the theme of poetry and place – a project I have called *Topo-poetics*. This includes an outline of the idea of topo-poetics drawing on the work of Aristotle, Heidegger and more recent philosophies of place, dwelling and poetics. The point is not to cover the familiar ground of ‘sense-of-place’ in poetry but rather to explore how the poem is a kind of place and the way in which poems create space and place through their very presence on the page. The argument is only tangentially about ‘places’ and is more about *the idea* of place itself. The introduction is followed by four short essays on collections by key poets of place including Elizabeth Bishop, John Burnside, Don McKay and Jorie Graham. A conclusion links the prose section to the poems that follow.

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Chapter One

Topopoetics: An Introduction

Introduction – Poetry and Place

This thesis addresses the question of how contemporary poetry (post 1970) in the UK, Canada and the United States confronts the possibility of dwelling in place. It explores the connection between place and poetry by examining how the place *of* the poem is used to explore places *beyond* the poem. It is an exploration of *topopoetics*. It approaches these questions through interpretation of four poets who approach what it is to be-in-the-world in subtly different ways ranging from encounters with the wild to life on the move. The four chapters that follow this introduction are explorations of the topopoetic practice of Elizabeth Bishop (*Geography III*), John Burnside (*The Asylum Dance*), Don McKay (*Strike/Slip*) and Jorie Graham (*PLACE*). The key theoretical terms that guide this exploration are the concepts of ‘place’ and ‘dwelling’. My readings of the four collections are informed by contemporary cultural geography as well as writings by philosophers Martin Heidegger, Jeff Malpas and others.

The project exists in the context of a relationship between contemporary cultural geography and creative practice that is explored in the introduction and sustained throughout the project. Geographers have frequently used creative literature (usually novels) to illustrate or

demonstrate geographical themes.¹ For the most part, this enterprise has involved evacuating the geographical themes in literature rather than *applying* spatial thinking to creative texts. Some geographers have also been poets.² From the other side, poets have frequently looked to the poetry they find in the notion of 'geography' in their creative practice.³

These poets, and others, mobilize the word 'geography' as a poetically suggestive term which connects self and world – the small worlds of human relations and the large landscapes they dwell in. Perhaps the strangest coming together of geography and poetry were the visits the modernist poet Charles Olson made to the resolutely anti-modernist geographer, Carl Sauer. Indeed, Sauer was one of the main inspirations for Olson's poetics.⁴ Poets have also taken to writing about place in the form of creative non-fiction essays. The recent explosion of place-based

¹ See, for instance, Tuan Y-F. (1978) *Literature and Geography: Implications for Geographical Research*. In: Ley D and Samuels M (eds) *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems*. London: Croom Helm, 194-206, Pocock DCD. (1981) *Humanistic Geography and Literature: Essays on the Experience of Place*, London: Croom Helm, Saunders A. (2013) *The Spatial Event of Writing: John Galsworthy and the Creation of Fraternity*. *cultural geographies* 20: 285-298, Sharp JP. (2000) *Towards a Critical Analysis of Fictive Geographies*. *Area* 32: 327-334, Daniels S and Rycroft S. (1993) *Mapping the Modern City: Alan Sillitoe's Nottingham Novels*. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18: 460-480.

² Watson JW. (1950) *Of Time and the Lover*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, Appleton J. (2009) *A Love Affair with Landscape: Poems*, Teddington: Wildhern Press, de Leeuw S. (2012) *Geographies of a Lover*, Edmonton: NeWest Press.

³ Dorn E. (1965) *Geography*, London: Fulcrum Press, Wigmore G. (2007) *Soft Geography*, Madeira Park, BC: Caitlin Press, Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Armitage S. (1988) *Human Geography*, Huddersfield: Smith/Doorstop.

⁴ O. J. Ford, 'Charles Olson and Carl Sauer: Towards a Methodology of Knowing', *boundary 2* 2 (1973), pp.145-150.

texts which have broadly been labeled as 'psychogeography' has had more than its fair share of poets as essayists.⁵ Often these texts gently question some of the legacies of the romantic tradition, including both the lone romantic narrator and the wild natural landscapes that are at the heart of the tradition. Often the places in these essays are on the edge, combinations of nature and culture, peri-urban or versions of the urban wild. Geography, it seems, is very much part of the poet's toolkit.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which poetry is connected to place is in the evocation of 'sense of place'. There are certainly poets who seem to carry with them the places they inhabit. Think of the richness of place evocation in the work of John Clare, Seamus Heaney or Frank O'Hara for instance. This capacity for poetry to evoke particular places is well rehearsed and has recently been subject to renewed commentary in engaging combinations of literary criticism and travel guide.⁶ This thesis is not primarily about this poetic evocation of 'sense-of-place' although that theme does inevitably arise. Rather, I am concerned to explore the idea of place in poetry (rather than 'places' in poetry). How does poetry enact place? How do poets poetically dwell? How are poems themselves places? Place here is not simply the reference for poets and poems but is an active participant in the creation of poetic worlds. Place is both inside

⁵ Armitage S. (2012) *Walking Home : Travels with a Troubadour on the Pennine Way*, London: Faber and Faber, Sprackland J. (2012) *Strands : A Year of Discoveries on the Beach*, London: Jonathan Cape, Farley P and Roberts MS. (2011) *Edgelands : Journeys into England's True Wilderness*, London: Jonathan Cape.

⁶ Sheers O. (2009) *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, London: Penguin Classics.

and outside the poem. In this sense, my arguments follow more recent developments in inter-disciplinary engagements between geography and poetry as well as more experimental considerations of a spatial turn within poetic practice.⁷

Before turning to the definition of *topopoetics* it is first necessary to clarify the key concept of *place*. At its most basic level place refers to location. It is the answer to the question ‘where?’ But place is also more than this. It names particular collections of things. A place at any scale, from the corner of a room to the whole earth, is a gathering of material objects which, in a particular combination form something unique. Thus a place such as Boston or Moscow is marked by its clearly visible shape and form – the result of the way in which things have been gathered historically and continue to be gathered into the future. One, current, way to think about this gathering function of place is as an *assemblage*.⁸ Places are not just assemblages of things though. Places are also practiced or enacted. The things people (alongside other non-human actants) do give a place some of its character. A square in the south of Europe will have a particular shape – a topography – but it will also be the place it is as a

⁷ Alexander N and Cooper D. (2013) *Poetry and Geography : Space and Place in Post-War Poetry*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, Davidson I. (2010) *Radical Spaces of Poetry*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, Davidson I and Skoulding Z. (2013) *Placing Poetry*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, Tarlo H. (2011) *The Ground Aslant : An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry*, Exeter: Shearsman, Kreider K. (2014) *Poetics and Place: The Architecture of Sign, Subjects and Site*, London: I.B.Tauris.

⁸ DeLanda M. (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society : Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, London ; New York: Continuum, Cresswell T. (2014) Place. In: Lee R, Castree N, Kitchin R, et al. (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Human Geography*. London: Sage, 7-25.

result of the unique ways in which it is walked in by old men after lunch – a kind of practice that is absent from squares in Scandinavia for instance. This performance of place, alongside the multiple forms of representation that work in and on place, give a place meaning. For this reason we talk about a ‘sense-of-place’. Places are not just locations but rich gatherings of things, practices and meanings. They are, as the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has suggested, centres of meaning and fields of care.⁹

Topopoetics/Edopoetics/Geopoetics

The precise terms of my engagement with poetry/place are encapsulated in the term *topopoetics*.¹⁰ Topopoetics has two close cousins: edopoetics and geopoetics. Edopoetics is a well established genre of poetic practice (edopoetry) and criticism (edopoetics). It even has its own house journal – *Edopoetics*. Several already influential anthologies of edopoetry have emerged as well as several books of criticism under the edopoetics title.¹¹

The prefix *eco* comes from the ancient Greek – *oikos* – which means ‘house’ or ‘household’. It is there in ‘economics’ as much as ‘ecology’. It is

⁹ Tuan Y-F. (1974) Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective. *Progress in Human Geography* 6: 211-252.

¹⁰ I came up with the term *topopoetics* independently but it follows logically from Malpas’ analysis of Heidegger and his use of the term *topographic* as well as Gaston Bachelard’s notion of *topoanalysis*. I subsequently discovered a few previous uses of the term *topopoetics*. Most important is Moslund SP. (2011) The Presencing of Place in Literature: Toward an Embodied Topopoetic Mode of Reading. In: Tully RT (ed) *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 29-43.

¹¹ Fisher-Wirth AW and Street L-G. (2013) *The Edopoetry Anthology*, San Antonio, TX.: Trinity University Press. Astley N. (2007) *Earth Shattering : Edopoems*, Tarsset: Bloodaxe, Knickerbocker S. (2012) *Edopoetics : The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

also at the heart of the ancient Greek understanding of the inhabited (known) earth, which was called the oikoumene (ecumene). The emphasis of ecopoetry and eco-poetics is on the natural world. It has its roots in 'nature poetry' and the romantic tradition. It focuses on the earth as our home but with an emphasis on the earth itself (more than the human action that makes it home). Ecopoetry/poetics is often philosophical and political in outlook, frequently embracing experimental form in addition to forms of spirituality – especially Buddhism (particularly in the USA). It tends to have an insistently critical edge focusing on human mishandling of the natural world. The editors of a recent ecopoetry anthology recognize 'nature poetry', environmental poetry' and 'ecological poetry' as subfields of ecopoetry with the latter being more experimental and post-structural in form – willingly playing with intellectual concerns and the space of the page while problematizing both the romantic self and the wild landscape that have been central to the nature poetry tradition.¹² While eco-poetics is not the subject of this thesis there are clearly many overlaps with topo-poetics – particularly the idea of home. Geopoetics and geo-poetry are less established forms of practice and criticism. The term is most often associated with Kenneth White and his Scottish Centre for Geopoetics. The Centre's website helpfully provides a kind of programmatic definition.

It is deeply critical of Western thinking and practice over the last

¹² Fisher-Wirth AW and Street L-G. (2013) *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, San Antonio, TX.: Trinity University Press.

2500 years and its separation of human beings from the rest of the natural world, and proposes instead that the universe is a potentially integral whole, and that the various domains into which knowledge has been separated can be unified by a poetics which places the planet Earth at the centre of experience.

....

It seeks a new or renewed sense of world, a sense of space, light and energy which is experienced both intellectually, by developing our knowledge, and sensitively, using all our senses to become attuned to the world, and requires both serious study and a certain amount of de-conditioning of ourselves by working on the body-mind.

It also seeks to express that sensitive and intelligent contact with the world by means of a poetics i.e. a language drawn from a way of being which attempts to express reality in different ways e.g. oral expression, writing, visual arts, music, and in combinations of different art forms.¹³

The term 'geopoetics' actually has an earlier and surprising origin. The term 'geopoetry' was used by the geologist, Harry Hess, one of the key scientists in the theory of plate tectonics. His revolutionary article announcing his theories was titled 'History of Ocean Basins'. In the

¹³ This and more can be found at <http://www.geopoetics.org.uk/welcome/what-is-geopoetics/>

introduction he wrote “I shall consider this an essay in geopoetry”.¹⁴ He seems to mean by this term that the paper is lacking in the factual information necessary to make a good scientific case. In some ways the paper was a work of imagination about the earth. The poet, Don McKay (the subject of chapter four), put it this way.

Now that so much evidence is in, and no one disbelieves in plate tectonics any more (at least no one who does not also disbelieve in evolution), the term might be allowed to lapse, a marriage of convenience whose *raison d'être* has evaporated. But, as you can see, I don't think it ought to be. I think that Harry Hess, like Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, or any other creative scientist, enters a mental space beyond ordinary analysis, where conjecture and imaginative play are needed and legitimate, and that this is a mental space shared with poets. But even more than this poetic license, I would say, the practice of geopoetry promotes astonishment as part of the acceptable perceptual frame. Geopoetry makes it legitimate for the natural historian or scientist to speculate and gawk, and equally legitimate for the poet to benefit from close observation, and from some of the amazing facts that science turns up. It provides a crossing point, a bridge over the infamous gulf separating scientific from poetic frames of mind, a gulf which has not served us well, nor the planet we inhabit with so little reverence or grace. Geopoetry, I am tempted

¹⁴ Hess HH. (1962) History of Ocean Basins. *Petrologic Studies* November 1962: 599-620.

to say, is the place where materialism and mysticism, those ancient enemies, finally come together, have a conversation in which each hearkens to the other, then go out for a drink.¹⁵

So geopoetics (and geopoetry) shares much with eco-poetics (and eco-poetry). It professes a concern for the earth ('geo' comes from the Ancient Greek for 'earth' or 'ground') and asks us to make an imaginative leap between the worlds of science, poetry and the mystical in order to produce new and hybrid kinds of earth-knowledge.

Topo-poetics shares much with the projects of both eco-poetics and geopoetics. But it is not the same thing. *Topo* comes from *topos* (τόπος), the Greek for 'place'. This is combined with *poetics*, which comes from *poiesis* (ποίησις), the Ancient Greek term for 'making'. *Topo-poetics* is thus 'place-making'. The particular lineage I am invoking for *topos* derives from the philosophy of Aristotle. Importantly, for our purposes, *topos* appears in both accounts of how the world comes into being and as a figure in rhetoric. In rhetoric a *topos* is a "particular argumentative form or pattern" from which particular arguments can be derived.¹⁶ It is very much like a form in poetry – a sonnet or a villanelle. It has a particular shape. This rhetorical view of *topos* is linked to the world through the art of memorizing long lists by locating things on a list in particular *places*.

¹⁵ McKayD. (2012) 'Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a Reader of Deep Time' http://geologicnow.com/4_McKay.php. I am grateful to the 'writtenintherocks' blog for leading me to this history <http://writtenintherocks.wordpress.com/2012/03/13/hello-world/>

¹⁶ For a discussion see the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/#7.1>

“For just as in the art of remembering, the mere mention of the places instantly makes us recall the things, so these will make us more apt at deductions through looking to these defined premises in order of enumeration.”¹⁷ In Aristotle’s rhetoric it is important to choose the right kind of *topos* for the argument at hand, just as it is important to select the right form for a particular poet. It draws our attention to the importance of (among other things) the shape on the page.

We encounter *topos* most frequently in words such as ‘topography’ – a word which means the shape of a place. This is not derived from rhetorics but from a more geographical meaning of *topos* that also emerged from Aristotle (meaning, more or less, *location*). *Topos* was often used interchangeably with *chora* – a root for modern words such as ‘choreography’ and ‘chorology’ (the study of regions). *Chora* is most often translated as meaning something like ‘region’ or ‘room’.¹⁸ After Aristotle *chora* gradually came to refer to administrative or technical regions while *topos* was gradually freed of its meaning of mere location and became a way of talking about sacred places such as burial sites.

The richer meaning of *topos* emerged more fully formed in the writing of Martin Heidegger and has recently been elaborated by the philosopher,

¹⁷ Aristotle *Topics* 163b28.32.

¹⁸ For detailed considerations of *chora* and *topos* in Greek thought, a task beyond the scope of this thesis, see Malpas JE. (1999) *Place and Experience : A Philosophical Topography*, Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, Walter EV. (1988) *Placeways : A Theory of the Human Environment*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Casey ES. (1997) *The Fate of Place : A Philosophical History*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jeff Malpas.¹⁹ Here *topos* is mobilized through the idea of the *topological* to indicate the primary nature of place for *being*. To put it bluntly, to be is to be *in place* – to be *here/there*. The connection between poetry and the idea of place as the site of being is right there at the outset as Heidegger's insistence on being as being-in-place originated from an encounter with the poetry of Hölderlin.²⁰

Heidegger's topological thought embraces two key concepts – *Dasein* and *dwelling*. *Dasein* means (approximately) 'being there'. It combines Heidegger's career-long enquiry into the nature of *being* with a recognition that being is always placed – that existence is thoroughly intertwined with place. The way that we make a home in the world is referred to as *dwelling*.

The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.²¹

¹⁹ Heidegger M. (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York,: Harper & Row, Malpas JE. (1999) *Place and Experience : A Philosophical Topography*, Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, Malpas JE. (2012b) Putting Space in Place: Philosophical Topography and Relational Geography. *Environment and Planning D-Society & Space* 30: 226-242, Malpas J. (2006) *Heidegger's Topology : Being, Place, World*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, Malpas J. (2012a) *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place : Explorations in the Topology of Being*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

²⁰ Malpas J. (2006) *Heidegger's Topology : Being, Place, World*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, Elden S. (1999) Heidegger's Holderlin and the Importance of Place. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30: 258-274.

²¹ Heidegger M. (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York,: Harper & Row. P. 145.

How, exactly, people enact this dwelling (or fail to enact it) becomes a central object for philosophy in Heidegger's later texts.²² Heidegger provides examples from idealized landscapes such as a bridge over a river.

The bridge swings over the stream "with ease and power." It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream.²³

Heidegger's bridge brings a place and a surrounding landscape into being. The bridge as a place does not just connect pre-existing spaces or operate within a pre-existing space – it brings space into being. In this sense,

²² Heidegger was a member of the Nazi Party, a membership he later denounced. There is no doubt that these ideas of dwelling were easily incorporated into a Nazi ideology of proper authentic (Aryan) dwelling counterposed to an inauthentic (Jewish, gay, Romany) form of (non) dwelling. Following Malpas I do not believe that this necessarily means that his ideas are irrecoverably infected.

²³ Heidegger M. (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York,: Harper & Row. P.150.

place comes before space. This is a reversal of the more frequent suggestion that places exist *in* space and that space comes before place.

In an important series of late essays Heidegger invokes poetry as a form of dwelling. He goes so far as to suggest that it is an ideal form of building and dwelling.

Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building.

Thus we confront a double demand: for one thing, we are to think of what is called man's existence by way of the nature of dwelling; for another, we are to think of the nature of poetry as a letting-dwell, as a – perhaps even *the* – distinctive kind of building. If we search out the nature of poetry according to this viewpoint, then we arrive at the nature of dwelling.²⁴

This observation (linking poetry to its root meaning of 'making') gets right to the heart of this thesis and the constitution of topopoetics. Poetry, as Heidegger observes, is a kind of *building* and thus a particularly important kind of *dwelling*. This building-as-dwelling, however, is more than the practical stuff of constructing in the correct way – it is, in Heidegger's view, about the essential character of being-in-the-world – being in, and with, place.

²⁴ Ibid. P.213.

Place is most often thought of as a segment of space imbued with meaning.²⁵ This idea of place is clearest in the notion of a 'sense-of-place'. Place, in this sense, draws a lot from Heidegger (and other phenomenologists) but neglects Heidegger's observation that the space that place is part of is derived from place rather than being antecedent to it. The construction of place constructs an outside as it happens. There is no outside of place before place, itself, comes into being. As with Heidegger's bridge, the world is given shape by place.

An engagement with the philosophical basis of *topos* adds to our original definition of place (above) as a gathering of things, practices and meanings in a particular location. While place is all of these things this definition fails to underline the basic significance of being *placed* to being-in-the-world. A *topopoetic* account is one which recognizes the specificity of the nearness of things in place and at the same time focused our attention on the way in which the poem is itself a form of *building* and *dwelling*. Poems of place are not simply poems *about* places, rather they are a species of place with a special relationship to what it is to be in (external) place. In Moslund's terms, "a topopoetic reading examines how physical dimensions and elements (such as topography, horizontality, verticality, earth, wind, water, light, vegetation, density, or scarcity of matter) fill out the work through its language."²⁶ It should be clear by

²⁵ Tuan Y-F. (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

²⁶ Moslund SP. (2011) The Presencing of Place in Literature: Toward an Embodied Topopoetic Mode of Reading. In: Tully RT (ed) *Geocritical*

now that *topopoetics* is related to but different from both *ecopoetics* and *geopoetics*. While it shares their interest in the relationship between poetry and the world it is more focused on the myriad ways in which people dwell in and on the earth. As Robert Hass has written in an essay on ecopoetry:

the poems of Frank O'Hara shopping in Manhattan in the summer heat and of Wendell Berry sowing a meadow for silage amid the violence of the Vietnam War and of Gary Snyder in the Sierra staring up at the summer stars become figures for an ability of poetry to show us where we are, or to show us wondering where we are.²⁷

Now we have established the broad contours of the topopoetic approach to poetry, our next task is to consider some (not all) of the specific ways in which poetry produces places. Topopoetics means closing the gap between the material form of the poem (topos in the sense of rhetorics) and the earthly world of place (topos as place). It means attending to the presence of place within the poem.

Blank Space/Full Space

Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 29-43.

²⁷ Hass R. (2013) American Ecopoetry: An Introduction. In: Fisher-Wirth AW and Street L-G (eds) *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. San Antonio, TX.: Trinity Univeristy Press, xli-lxv. P.lvii.

You leave space for the body, imagining the other part even though it isn't there. Henry Moore²⁸

Before, there was nothing, or almost nothing; afterwards, there isn't much, a few signs, but which are enough for there to be a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, a right and a left, a recto and a verso. Georges Perec²⁹

The 'blanks' indeed take on importance, at first glance; the versification demands them, as a surrounding silence, to the extent that a fragment, lyrical or of a few beats, occupies, in its midst, a third of the space of paper: I do not transgress the measure, only disperse it. Stephane Mallarmé³⁰

As should be clear by now, my interest here is in the combined impact of two meanings of *topos* – as correct form and as place – on understanding poetic approaches to and renditions of place. The act of building and dwelling that is a poem starts with a blank white space. By writing poems we gather that space and give it form. True – it already has edges and texture (it is, in Perec's terms "*almost nothing*") but words (as place)

²⁸ <http://abbycronin.co.uk/article/henry-moore-at-kew/>

²⁹ Perec G. (1997) *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, London, England ; New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin Books. P.10

³⁰ Stephane Mallarmé 1897 Preface to *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*

(A throw of the dice will never abolish chance).

<http://poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/MallarmeUnCoupdeDes.htm>

bring space into existence. The space becomes margins and gaps between words – even holes within letters. This relationship between poem and place and the space that takes shape around it is one of the defining elements of poetry.

Glyn Maxwell, in *On Poetry*, ruminates on blank space and silence in poetry.

Regard the space, the ice plain, the dizzying light. That past, that future. Already it isn't nothing. At the very least it's your enemy, and that's an awful lot. Poets work with two materials, one's black and one's white. Call them sound and silence, life and death, hot and cold, love and loss....

...

Call it this and that, whatever it is this time, just don't make the mistake of thinking the white sheet is nothing. It's nothing for your novelist, your journalist, your blogger. For those folk it's a tabular rasa, a giving surface. For the poet it is half of everything. If you don't know how to use it you are writing prose. If you write poems that you might call free and I might call unpatterned then skillful, intelligent use of the whiteness is all that you've got.³¹

Poems are patterns made from space. Even before a word is read you can see a poem's shape – the black against the white in Maxwell's terms. This

³¹ Maxwell G. (2012) *On Poetry*, London: Oberon. P.11.

is one of the most pleasing things about poetry and it serves no function at all in a novel or most other forms of writing.

This blank space has been the stuff of poetry seeing as poets have had to combat that blankness. Consider John Keats' sonnet, *Written on a Blank*

Space:

This pleasant tale is like a little copse:
The honied lines so freshly interlace,
To keep the reader in so sweet a place,
So that he here and there full-hearted stops;
And oftentimes he feels the dewy drops
Come cool and suddenly against his face,
And, by the wandering melody, may trace
Which way the tender-legged linnet hops.
Oh! what a power has white Simplicity!
What mighty power has this gentle story!
I, that do ever feel a thirst for glory,
Could at this moment be content to lie
Meekly upon the grass, as those whose sobbings
Were heard of none beside the mournful robins.

Here Keats confronts blankness and power of white simplicity. His poem gets some power from this blankness and becomes a little copse – a place that stands out from the treeless space around it. He makes it possible for the reader to linger in “so sweet a place”. Writing a poem is a little form of

place creation that configures blankness. This resonates with Wallace Stevens' 'Anecdote of the Jar':

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion every where.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Here the roundness of the jar (roundness is repeated throughout the poem in 'round', 'around' and 'surround') orders the "slovenly wilderness" around it – it orders and regulates a kind of blankness (the 'almost-nothing' of wilderness) in a contrived and designed way. Culture brings nature into perspective and makes it make sense in much the way the marks of the poem make the blank space make sense. Stevens' jar

performs similar functions to Heidegger's bridge. The poem does the same thing – bringing space into being.

Silence is the acoustic space in which the poem makes its large echoes. If you want to test this write a single word on a blank sheet of paper and stare at it: note the superior attendance to the word the silence insists upon, and how it soon starts to draw out the word's ramifying sense-potential, its etymological story, its strange acoustic signature, its calligraphic mark; you are reading a word as poetry.³²

Here, Don Paterson suggests that the self-aware special-ness of the poem is created by its being surrounded by blankness, which he equates with silence. Once again there is the merging of sight and sound – pure blankness and silence. The sense of sound is the only sense which has a unique word for absence. While silence is the absence of sound there is no word for the absence of smell or taste for instance (we have to resort to terms like 'tasteless'). Perhaps it is for this reason that blank space is compared to silence. It also reminds us of the origins of poetry in spoken forms. The blankness is not just something to be filled but an active component in the creation of the poem. The blank page is the friend of the poet allowing an infinite variety of form in the simple sense of shape. When the single word appears on the blank sheet the word-as-poem and

³² Paterson D. (2007) The Lyric Principle, the Sense of Sound. *Poetry Review* 97: 56-72. P.63.

the space around it are simultaneously brought into being. In this sense, one does not precede the other.

Philip Gross' command of space in his poems may be connected to an admiration for silence that comes from a Quaker faith. Consider the opening section of his poem, 'White Sheet'.

Note to self: might have to work
to break the beauty of white pages:
not much gets conceived
on an unsullied sheet.

Might have to sweat it a bit – not,
not in bounden duty but
with all the ruthless lack
of circumspection

of pure play

The silence is beautiful but needs the sweat of words to create the play of poetic presence. Gross suggests a kind of ludic creativity at work in the forming of word and space. We have to break the beauty of the blank and yet we depend on it for our artfulness. And then the reader sees what has emerged from the careful and playful dance of the word and the space.

Paterson describes the act of poetry as an emergence out of silence and space. This is not quite right. This assumes the pre-existence of a blankness and silence within which the words emerge. Perhaps, instead, the blankness is produced by the creative act. The blankness emerges with the noise.

There are similarities between the poet's relationship to blankness and the painter's relationship to the canvas. They are clearly not the same thing. In most painting the canvas is covered. The first thing many painters do is cover a canvas with paint and then start to work on the detail. The canvas is obliterated. The poet, on the other hand, cannot fill up the space he or she is confronted with. The poem needs to play with the space and allow the blankness to be part of the process. Don Paterson puts it this way:

Our formal patterning most often supplies a powerful typographical advertisement. What it advertises most conspicuously is that the poem has not taken up the whole page, and considers itself somewhat important. The white space around the poem then becomes a potent symbol of the poem's significant intent..³³

The space around the poem once written advertises the poem's importance as special words. The painter may paint blankness, applying

³³ Ibid. P.62.

white paint perhaps but rarely leaves the canvas untouched. But there are also similarities between the blank space of the painter and the poet. One similarity is suggested by Gilles Deleuze in his meditation on *Francis Bacon – The Logic of Sensation*. Here he suggests that the blank canvas that confronts the painter is not blank at all but invested with every painting ever done before.

In fact, it would be a mistake to think that the painter works on a white and virgin surface. The entire surface is already invested virtually with all kinds of clichés, which the painter will have to break with.³⁴

The image Deleuze gives us is of a painter confronted with the whole tradition of painting right there on the blank space which is no longer blank. This is the same for a poet who has to face the page/screen with the knowledge of all the poems that have gone before. There are all the ballads and sonnets, the free verse and the sestinas, Caedmon's Hymn, the long lines of Whitman, the dashes of Dickenson, iambic pentameter, half rhyme, sprung rhythm, spondees, syllabic experiments, language poetry and limericks – all of these pre-figure the first letter written or typed. The space is not blank but dizzyingly full. Returning to Deleuze:

³⁴ Deleuze G. (2005) *Francis Bacon : The Logic of Sensation*, London: Continuum. P.11.

It is a mistake to think that the painter works on a white surface. The figurative belief follows from this mistake. If the painter were before a white surface, he – or she – could reproduce on it an external object functioning as a model. The painter has many things in his head, or around him, or in his studio. Now everything he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work. They are all present in the canvas as so many images, actual or virtual, so that the painter does not have to cover a blank surface, but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it....In short, what we have to define are all these “givens” [*donees*] that are on the canvas before the painter’s work begins, and determine, among these givens, which are an obstacle, which are a help, or even the effects of a preparatory work.³⁵

The space of the poet, like that of the artist’s is a space to fill with what gets defined by the words or a seething endless presence of everything that has been written before. Which of these threatens the writer more and how to make the geography of a poem out of it?

In her book *Intimate Journal*, the French-Canadian poet Nicole Brossard reflects on blankness continually, in a way which reflects Deleuze’s writing on painting.

³⁵ Ibid. P.87.

The blanks, what are called white spaces, are in fact so full of thoughts, words, sensations, hesitations and audacities that it can all be translated only by a tautology, by another blank, a visual one. It is in the white space that anybody who writes, trembles, dies, and is reborn. Before and after the blank space everything goes well, because there is the text. And it fills up a life so well, a text does! Every text is a sample, that is to say a small amount displayed in order to give an idea of the whole.³⁶

Here Brossard's text reflects the fullness of blank space found in Deleuze's account of Bacon. The blank space is a presence that is full and overflowing – it is the space where everything happens. And blank space as white space can also be full as white is made up of all the colours. Returning to Brossard she see-saws between blank as full and blank as empty.

...one can never say everything. There are gaps, spaces. Blanks are inevitable. In painting, in music, in writing, the white space is de rigueur. The blank space is inseparable from fiction and from reality. Through the white space we engage the circumstances of writing as if entering into the invisibility of our thoughts. Others call white the void we need to fill in order to get to know society.

Or again white, the vibrant luminosity that is eventually separated

³⁶ Brossard N and Godard B. (2004) *Intimate Journal, or, Here's a Manuscript ; Followed by Works of Flesh and Metonymies*, Toronto: Mercury Press. P.65.

into the vividness of anecdotal colours, Blank of absence, white of full presence.³⁷

Once there is a poem on the page then there is the simultaneous presence of space and place. An act of dwelling has occurred that brings space into being. If we move beyond the blankness of the empty page/screen then we begin to see all the other ways in which space works for the poem. Take any poem, copy it, and apply a thick black marker to the lines of text. You end up with a black shape and a white shape. Space works as margins, as gaps, as signifiers of intent when the poet does anything other than left align the lines. Naturally this use of space is most pronounced in forms of experimental poetry in the modernist tradition: Mallarme's radical departures from the left margin, the projective verse of the Black Mountain School or the contemporary experimentation with 'erasure'. But space and place do their work too in traditional forms. The popularity of the sonnet is partly attributable to the perfect way it sits on the page, announcing itself as a poem.

Stasis and Flux

The *topos* of the poem results from its play of ink and the absence of ink. Something has to appear for space to emerge. Georges Perec makes this clear:

³⁷ Ibid. P. 72-73

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text.³⁸

Perec's book, *Species of Spaces* is a catalogue of spaces and places with chapters devoted to "The Apartment", "The Street" and "The Town" for instance. The first chapter, though, is "The Page". The page is immediately equivalent to spaces we may more easily think of as the world beyond the page. The page and its markings are not removed from, and about, the world – they are of the world. In this chapter Perec outlines the nature of a topopoetics in simple terms. Writing, particularly writing poems, is the production of space and place. It is a cartographic act that combines senses of home and journey. The process of writing creates coordinates – a top and a bottom, left and right, beginning and end. In amongst the words are pauses and hesitations. There is a poetic topological correspondence between the poem and the place it is *about*.

In Peter Stockwell's account of 'cognitive poetics' a key idea is the notion of figure/ground – the notion that some things appear to be more important, more fluid, more foregrounded while others remain as

³⁸ Perec G. (1997) *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, London, England ; New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin Books. P.13.

background and setting (and thus seemingly less important). The first is figure and the second is ground. The figure is prominent and the ground is not. This occurs most obviously in the way characters are more important than the places they are in in novels. Description is often about ground and action involves figures. Figures often move across a ground that appears relatively static. This movement, in a poem, is expressed with direction words such as “over” or “in” or “towards”. Topopoetics challenges some of the assumptions of the figure/ground equation. As place is most often equated with ground it tends to have a degree of deadness associated with it. It seems less important. Topopoetics draws our attention to the opposite – the active presence of place in the poem. It is, as Moslund has suggested, a reading “not for the plot but for the setting, where the setting of the story is not reduced to an expandable passive or ornamental backdrop for the story’s action. Rather, place is experienced as one of the primary events of the story and any action is experienced as being shaped, at least partially, by the event of place.”³⁹

Another key term in cognitive poetics is “image schema” which refers to “locative expressions of place”.⁴⁰ Stockwell gives the examples of “JOURNEY, CONTAINER, CONDUIT, UP/DOWN, FRONT/BACK, OVER/UNDER, INTO/OUT OF”. Terms of mobility catch our attention and

³⁹ Moslund SP. (2011) The Presencing of Place in Literature: Toward an Embodied Topopoetic Mode of Reading. In: Tully RT (ed) *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 29-43.

⁴⁰ Stockwell P. (2002) *Cognitive Poetics : An Introduction*, London: Routledge. P.16.

urge us to continue reading – static elements are frankly boring and we quickly forget them. The difference between the moving elements and static elements produces literary and cognitive effects. But even before any particular word is written or read we have the poem – the lines that form a shape in space. As we read left to right and top to bottom against the white space a figure forms over ground. A passage is enacted. Stuff happens. Poems are made out of arrangements of type and blank space – figure and ground in a physical, pre-verbal sense. I am not sure what the cognitive content of this patterning is but it is surely important to poetry – even before the specifics of actual words and their meanings. This is the start of the geography of the poem.

This notion of the black space (writing) against the white space (the space beyond the poem that nevertheless defines, and is defined by, the poem) can be retold as the simultaneous creation of “place” and “space”. Making a poem in this sense is place-making or dwelling. There are two spatial metaphors at work in the basic language of poetry that point towards this: these are the words ‘stanza’ and ‘verse’. Stanza means ‘room’, ‘station’ or ‘stopping place’ and refers to blocks of black separated by white on the page. These are rooms we pass between surrounded by outside. Stanzas found their way into written poetry through the act of memorizing verse. Rooms, or stopping places, are memorized and filled with words that would be activated by an imagined walk through the rooms. While stanzas are clearly places to stop – they are also clearly linked by movement. Movement also occurs within the stanzas as we

follow the lines of text. The word 'verse' comes from the practice of tilling the soil – agriculture – the root of culture. It is rooted in the Latin *versus*, meaning a 'furrow' or a 'turning of the plow'. As the farmer (or farm worker) tills the soil they come to an edge, turn around, then make their way back, pacing out the day. Verse can thus be found in 'reverse'. These two ideas – stanza – as a block of bounded space and verse as an action – a form of practice that brings those blocks alive and reminds us that they are only there because of movement – these two ideas describe something of the geography of the poem as the interplay of fixity and flux of being and becoming.

Poetry is often referred to as freezing time. In fact, many kinds of representation are said to freeze time (and thus, in some circles, representation has become deeply suspect).⁴¹ In poetry's case, this could not be further from the truth. Poetry, to me, is a mobile form related to walking and, indeed, ploughing and reversing. This sense of mobile journeying in the poem is part of the topological understanding of the poem on the page. Percec knew this:

I write: I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I travel across it,

⁴¹ See, for instance, Anderson B and Harrison P. (2010) *The Promise of Non-Representational Theories*. In: Anderson B and Harrison P (eds) *Taking Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*. Farnham: Ashgate, 1-36.

I incite *blanks, spaces* (jumps in the meaning,
discontinuities, transitions, changes of key).⁴²

We make our places by doing them –by beating the bounds rather than drawing a line in the sand. Beyond that place of movement is the white of silence. But even that space is being shaped, if only as the negative image of the poem.

Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. That for which room is made is always granted and hence is joined, that is, gathered, by virtue of a location, that is, by such a thing as the bridge. *Accordingly, spaces receive their being from locations and not from "space."*⁴³

Inside and Outside

One way of thinking about place is to think of it as a singular thing – specific, particular, bounded and separate. The very idea of place is bound up with uniqueness and a sense of division from what lies beyond it. But places are actually connected into networks and flows – they have an extrovert side.⁴⁴ This paradoxical sense of separation and connectedness is noted by Malpas.

⁴² Perce G. (1997) *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, London, England ; New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin Books. P.3.

⁴³ Heidegger M. (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York,: Harper & Row. P.152.

⁴⁴ See Massey D. (1997) A Global Sense of Place. In: Barnes T and Gregory D (eds) *Reading Human Geography*. London: Arnold, 315-323.

One of the features of place is the way in which it establishes relations of inside and outside – relations that are directly tied to the essential connection between place and boundary or limit. To be located is to be within, to be somehow enclosed, but in a way that at the same time opens up, that makes possible. Already this indicates some of the directions in which any thinking of place must move – toward ideas of opening and closing, of concealing and revealing, or focus and horizon, of finitude and “transcendence,” of limit and possibility, of mutual relationality and coconstitution.⁴⁵

This feature of place is one which translates into the *topos* of the poem. Poems too open and close, conceal and reveal. Poems speak to things which lie outside the poem. Clearly the poem has a referential function – like all language. It is *about* something. But even if we include the things the poem directly names on the *inside* of the poem, there is yet another set of things that are not directly named but instead gestured towards. In this way the poem opens up to the world.

We have seen how one of the features of place is the way in which it gathers things. A place is a unique assemblage. The things that constitute a place often appear to us as specific to that place even if they have, in fact, travelled from elsewhere. Things form a particular topography of

⁴⁵ Malpas J. (2012a) *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place : Explorations in the Topology of Being*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P.2.

place at the same time as their journeys link the inside of a place to elsewhere. Poetry is one way in which we stop and wonder at the specificity of the way things appear to us in place. Poetry involves being attentive to things and the ways in which they are gathered. Poetry is an 'encounter with the world'.

No matter the changes in Heidegger's philosophical vocabulary, a key point around which his thinking constantly turns is the idea that thinking arises, and can only arise, out of our original encounter with the world – an encounter that is always singular and situated, in which we encounter ourselves as well as the world, and in which what first appears is not something abstract or fragmented, but rather the things themselves, as things, in their concrete unity.⁴⁶

This insistence on the specificity of 'things themselves' is one way we can think about poetic attention. A poetic concern with place starts from a recognition of an original encounter which is "singular and situated". The more the poem can reflect this situated singularity the more faithful it will be to the place that lies beyond it. But it would be wrong to think of the 'concrete unity' of place as a pure, bounded entity with no relation to a world (even an abstract world) beyond it. Places always point to a world beyond them, and so do poems.

⁴⁶ Ibid. P.14.

One way in which the place of the poem opens up to its outside is through metaphor. Metaphor is another component of poetics that has a spatial root in travel. Metaphor comes from the Greek *metaphorá* (μεταφορά) for ‘transfer’ or ‘carry over’.

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a “metaphor” – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.⁴⁷

Metaphors perform two operations simultaneously – they say **a** equals **b** and, at the same time, **a** does not equal **b**. Just saying **a** is the same as **b** is not metaphorical. For a metaphor to be a metaphor **a** has to also be different from **b**. The more different they are the more powerful the metaphor. This is true as long **a** and **b** are not so different that they are not, in fact, similar in any way.

Metaphors have a spatial logic, they connect a thing which is present in the poem to something which is absent outside of it. In doing this the absent thing becomes present. The inside is connected to the outside.

Using metaphor means seeing one thing as another – a form of

⁴⁷ de Certeau M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press. P.115.

understanding that is “fundamentally spatial in organization.”⁴⁸ This spatiality is one which is not bounded and singular but, instead, one which makes a connection, or, as Jan Zwicky puts it. “a linguistic short-circuit.”

Non-metaphorical ways of speaking conduct meaning, in insulated carriers, to certain ends and purposes. Metaphors shave off the insulation and meaning arcs across the gap.⁴⁹

The place which is a poem has both the meanings which lie within the boundaries marked by the presence of type, *and* the meanings that this type connects to. The text of the poem is both a neat, closed entity and a set of links to what lies beyond. It is in this sense that the metaphor formulas **a=b** and **a≠b** simultaneously recognizes the inherent qualities of what lies within the poem and the connections to what lies without.

A metaphor can appear to be a gesture of healing – it pulls a stitch through the rift that our capacity for language opens between us and the world. A metaphor is an explicit refusal of the idea that the distinctness of things is their fundamental ontological characteristic.

⁴⁸ Zwicky J. (2003) *Wisdom & Metaphor*, Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press. § 3

⁴⁹ Ibid. § 68

But their distinctness is *one* of their most fundamental ontological characteristics (the other being their interpenetration and connectedness). In this sense, a metaphor heals nothing – there is nothing to be healed.⁵⁰

Metaphor works on the dual capacity to recognize the concrete unity of the assemblage of things that lies before us and to insist on their connectedness to a world beyond. Things (and the assemblages of things which are places) are both distinct (in that there is no other assemblage exactly like this one) and connected (things are always interconnected). Metaphor allows us to be near to things, in the way both a poet and a phenomenologist insist on, and to recognize a constitutive outside. This outside is also a world of things, practices and meanings which can be drawn upon to recognize the specificity of ‘here’.

Four Poets of Place

Topopoetics means being attentive to both the *topos* of the poem and the *topos* of place in the world. It means tracing the relations between them. Here, I have outlined some of the most important aspects of the poem-as-place: the relation between words and blank space, the role of stasis and flux and the relationship between inside and outside.

The remainder of the prose component of the thesis consists of examinations of the roles of place in the poetry of four poets. Chapter

⁵⁰ Ibid. § 59

Two considers the collection *Geography III* by Elizabeth Bishop. *Geography III* was published in 1977 and is thus the first of the collections considered here. In some ways Bishop is an obvious place to start for an account of place and poetry. Various forms of geography are woven through all of her collections and her relationship to place was a constant concern that reached its final form in *Geography III*, her last book. In other ways, though, Bishop's poetry is notable for its account of a failure to find a place in the world – a failure of dwell. Her geography is one of distanced reflection on home and belonging that reflects a life spent on the move between Nova Scotia, New England, Florida, Mexico, Brazil and New York. It also reflects her marginal existence as a lesbian in a hetero-normative world. This chapter reflects on this sense of displacement through the device of the textbook geography questions that appear as an epigraph to *Geography III*. Chapter Three explores the topo-poetics of John Burnside's 2000 collection, *The Asylum Dance*. Burnside's book begins with an epigraph from Heidegger on the nature of *dwelling* and many of the poems in the collection, particularly the longer ones, locate the reader in places on the margin – particularly the margin of land and sea which also features in Bishop's collection. The key term in this chapter is "inbetweenness" as Burnside uses the liminal to explore negotiated and tenuous attachments to place as well as the desire to be elsewhere. The focus of Chapter Four is the 2006 collection, *Strike/Slip* by the Canadian poet, Don McKay, another poet who uses Heidegger directly. The act of dwelling, in McKay's case, is acted out in relation to the world of nature – particularly that part of nature we normally approach through geology –

rocks. Finally, Chapter Five examines American poet, Jorie Graham's 2012 collection, *PLACE*. In this collection Graham develops a poetic engagement with the very idea of 'place'. It is less obviously focused on a world of distinct places than the other three collections, and generally happier to engage in abstract philosophical musings. The central idea in this chapter is *friction* – a notion that draws our attention to how things which move become particular when they rub against the *topos* of the world.

Chapter Two

Elizabeth Bishop In and Out of Place.

(Geography III, 1976)

That Elizabeth Bishop is a geographer-poet is perhaps stating the obvious. Consider the titles of her collections: *North & South* (1946), *A Cold Spring* (1955), *Questions of Travel* (1965), and *Geography III* (1976). The cover of her first book, *North and South* featured a compass rose indicating not just north and south but east, west, northeast and so on.⁵¹ This device sets up an abiding higher level metaphor for Bishop's poetry that migrates between the north of Nova Scotia, the site of her childhood, and the south of Brazil, where she spent many of the later years of her life with her partner, Maria Carlota Costallat de Mecedo Soares.⁵² As Eleanor Cook has suggested, the appearance of this device on the cover, the title page and frontispiece points towards a life spent voyaging that was never far away from the sea.

The compass rose that adorned *North and South* is mirrored by the cover of Bishop's final book, the main focus of this essay, *Geography III*. Here we are presented with the cover – a plain brown background with the geographer's tools – a globe, pens and books, an inkwell and a surveying

⁵¹ Bishop E. (1946) *North & South*, Boston,: Houghton Mifflin company.

⁵² Cook E. (2009) Elizabeth Bishop's Cartographic Imagination Once More: Rereading "the Map". In: Burt S and Halpren N (eds) *Something Understood: Essays and Poetry for Helen Vendler*. Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 207-226.

instrument – not unlike the contents of the room in Vermeer’s painting *the Geographer* (1668).⁵³ The collection appears as a miniature replica of a geography textbook for a schoolroom perhaps.

The geography theme continues even before the contents page where we are presented with an extract, artfully arranged, of a real-life geography text book “*From “First Lessons in Geography,” Monteith’s Geographical Series, A. S. Barnes & Co., 1884*”. Bishop has selected sets of questions and answers from lessons VI⁵⁴ and X concerning the general definition of geography and the use of maps. This frontispiece can be read as a kind of extra found poem. The final section, as it is presented, appears quite surreal in the tradition of prose poetry. It is also positioned on its own page – so can be read quite separately from the more prosaic sections that precede it. It is the collection’s 11th poem and a key to understanding aspects of the others.

LESSON X

What is a Map?

A picture of the whole, or a part, of the Earth’s surface.

What are the directions on a Map?

⁵³ Bishop was a fan of Vermeer.

⁵⁴ Actually Bishop has either accidentally or deliberately misrepresented the textbook slightly as the part she calls “Lesson VI” is actually “Lesson I” in the actual text.

Toward the top, North; toward the bottom, South; to the right, East;
to the left, West.

In what direction from the center of the picture is the Island?

North.

*In what direction is the Volcano? The Cape? The Bay? The Lake? The
Straight? The Mountains? The Isthmus?*

*What is in the East? In the West? In the South? In the North? In the
Northwest? In the Southeast? In the Northeast? In the Southwest?*⁵⁵

Through the cover and the geography text epigraph, Bishop constructs a framework for the poems that follow. They are bound (literally) within a notion of geography, a notion that was already established with the cover of her first book and the first poem in that book ('The Map'). It remains unclear why this is *Geography III*. Perhaps, it reflects that this is the third of her collection with an explicitly geographical theme and title (*A Cold Spring* being the exception – with its more temporal emphasis). It completes a trio of geographies: *North and South*, *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III*.

The very first poem in Bishop's first collection, *North and South* (and also the first poem in her later *Complete Poems* (1969)) is called "The Map". Here Bishop proclaims the virtues of geography (or cartography, at least)

⁵⁵ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

over history proclaiming in the final line “More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors”. In a 1978 interview for *Christian Science Monitor*, following the publication of *Geography III*, she is asked directly about her fondness for maps and geography and she recalls staring at a map on the floor of a New York apartment after graduating and that the poem, ‘The Map’ “wrote itself” and admits to the possibility that the poem “corresponded to some part of me which I was unaware of at the time.”⁵⁶ It is that part of Bishop that is the subject of this chapter.

Geography III was to be Bishop’s last book, published in 1976. It consists of ten poems over 50 pages. Some of the poems, most famously, ‘The Moose’, had taken as many as thirty years to complete. There is clearly a geography theme running through the book. In ‘In The Waiting Room’ the narrator as a young girl reads *National Geographic* in a dentist’s waiting room in Worcester Massachusetts. In ‘Crusoe in England’ we see Robinson Crusoe ruminating on his desert island experience from the British Isles. ‘Night City’ examines the view of a city at night from an approaching plane. ‘The Moose’ follows a bus journey south from Nova Scotia. The geography becomes more abstract in ‘12 O’Clock News’, a prose poem that reports on a faraway land. ‘Poem’ returns us to the Nova Scotia of Bishop’s childhood while Bishop’s best known poem, ‘One Art’ is less obviously geography themed yet still manages to map the loss of a loved one onto “two lost cities”. ‘The End of March’ takes us on a

⁵⁶ Johnson A. (1996 [1978]) *Geography of the Imagination*. In: Monteiro G (ed) *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*. University Press of Mississippi, 98-104.. P.101.

beach walk. The collection, in other words, takes us places – often in the form of memories of places from Bishop’s past.

The locational settings of the poems in the collection, while worth noting, are not the most interesting level at which geography works. In order to explore the topoetics in *Geography III*, I explore the contents of the book through the lens of the clues Bishop has given in her use of James Monteith’s *First Lessons in Geography* as an epigraph.

LESSON VI

What is Geography?

A description of the earth’s surface.

What is the Earth?

The planet or body on which we live.

What is the shape of the Earth?

Round, like a ball.

Of what is the Earth’s surface composed?

Land and water.

This simple, schoolroom language (not so different from some of the language Bishop uses in the poems – particularly ‘In the Waiting Room’) conceals the profound nature of some of the themes. In the rest of this

essay I read *Geography III* through the first, second and fourth of these questions.⁵⁷

I. What is Geography? *A description of the earth's surface.*

Bishop was quite insistent that her poems were often predominately little more than descriptions: "The settings, or descriptions, of my poems are almost invariably just plain facts - or as close to the facts as I can write them".⁵⁸ Bishop's poems are certainly often descriptions of (elements of) the earth's surface. Her poems, in this collection and elsewhere, are full of details that give us ways into the landscapes of the poems. They "insist on facts and thinginess, most behaving on first sight as if they were only simple description".⁵⁹ So this insistence on "thinginess" is geography according to the epigraph. Geography is, we are told, the description of the earth's surface. The fact that it is the *earth's surface* also suggests something wide-ranging but shallow – the whole earth but just its surface. It suggests traveled routes as much as dwelled roots.

Geography III, like most of Bishop's poetry, is full of detailed descriptions of place. Not all modes of description are the same however, and Bishop's mode, manages to suggest a contradictory motion of engagement and estrangement. The close observation of the details of a place, whether the

⁵⁷ The third question and answer appear to have little bearing on the poems that follow.

⁵⁸ Bishop E and Giroux R. (1994) *One Art : Letters*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. P.621.

⁵⁹ Goldensohn L. (1992) *Elizabeth Bishop : The Biography of a Poetry*, New York: Columbia University Press. P.1.

towns in Nova Scotia or the inside of a dentist's waiting room, indicate a precise and intense engagement. At the same time however, the ways in which these engagements are articulated are strangely flat, matter-of-fact and distanced. It is as if the engagement with the details of her surroundings makes us feel outside, rather than inside, place. The more things are noted, the more removed we feel. This happens both spatially and temporally in *Geography III* as places are most often seen through the lens of memories – memories that may, or may not, be Bishop's own.

It is as memory that we encounter place description in the first lines of the collection, in 'In the Waiting Room'.

In Worcester, Massachusetts
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
Early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. P.3.

Bishop chooses to begin her collection with the words “In Worcester, Massachusetts”. It is hard to imagine a flatter, more straightforward evocation of place than to simply name it. This is immediately followed by an account of the waiting room and why she was there. This is achieved by short lists of objects, “arctics and overcoats,/ lamps and magazines.” It is written in a very simple and unreflective way. The language mirrors that of the child, Elizabeth, at the centre of the poem, who, we discover, is about to turn seven. The voice is looking back in time – so we can assume that this is Elizabeth in the future, but the simplicity of the language suggests that it is not the Elizabeth Bishop writing the poem but a younger version – perhaps one who is ten or eleven. Perhaps it is an entirely different Elizabeth. The age of the narrator is actually quite indeterminate.

One of the objects in the waiting room is a copy of the magazine *National Geographic* which the young Elizabeth picks up. The very presence of the magazine reminds us of the geography lessons in the epigraph. Perhaps we are in for another geography lesson? Straightaway we are in a different place – inside a volcano – “black, and full of ashes” – and then in Africa:

A dead man slung on a pole
- “Long Pig,” the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;

black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.⁶¹

Bishop (and the narrator) are very specific about the magazine, its contents and its date. It is not just any *National Geographic* but the *National Geographic* of February 1918. The details of the contents of that issue appear as fact but are, in fact, untrue. While volcanoes did feature, African women did not. The non-existence of these details makes the poem's insistence on them somewhat strange. Just the appearance of fact – which appears as detail – gives a sense of close observation.

The poem ends as it begins

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.⁶²

⁶¹ Ibid. P.4.

⁶² Ibid. PP.7-8.

Here, the line “in Worcester, Massachusetts” is repeated. We are given more details – the slush and cold – but we are once again displaced by the simple, unconnected, statement that “The war was on” - a statement that changes the scale at which the whole poem is understood, connecting Elizabeth, Worcester, the waiting room, and even Kenya to larger historical spaces. Through its description, ‘In the Waiting Room’ presents us with a set of (dis)placements shifting between Worcester, the waiting room, the Africa inside the *National Geographic* and the war in Europe. The geography of the poem is like a Russian doll with place nested within place.

The description of things is not the only kind of description in ‘In the Waiting Room’. Lee Edelman reads ‘In the Waiting Room’ as a more subtle geography of inside and outside. The key moment for her occurs when the young Elizabeth closes the magazine and suddenly hears a cry of pain.⁶³

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain
– Aunt Consuelo’s voice –
not very loud or long.
I wasn’t at all surprised;
even then I knew she was

⁶³ Edelman L. (1993) The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'in the Waiting Room'. In: Lombardi MM (ed) *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Charlottesville, VA.: University Press of Virginia, 91-107.

a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I – we – were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.⁶⁴

The clause “from inside” is confusing in this stanza. It suggests at least three geographies – her aunt inside the waiting room, the inside of the magazine and inside herself. The first use of the word ‘inside’ in the poem refers to her aunt in the dentist’s office: “My aunt was inside / what seemed like a long time”. The second use of the word is to describe the “inside of a volcano” in *National Geographic* – an inside that is “spilling over / in rivulets of fire”. Elizabeth finishes reading the magazine “too shy to stop” and “then I looked at the cover: / the yellow margins, the date”. The iconic yellow margins of *National Geographic* suggest a frame - an enclosure – for what she has just encountered. It is then that we

⁶⁴ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. PP.7-8.

encounter the third use of the word “inside”: “Suddenly, from inside, / came an *oh!* of pain / – Aunt Consuelo’s voice – / not very loud or long.” This final ‘inside’ being evoked is inside of Elizabeth herself. The voice that starts out as her Aunt’s becomes her own, coming from inside her own mouth.

What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth⁶⁵

Geography III is full of things (including words, creatures and lava) crossing lines and spilling out. In a letter to Marianne Moore Bishop enthused about the possibilities that arise from piling *things* up. It almost reads like a surrealist manifesto for the joys of juxtaposition.

I have that continuous uncomfortable feeling of “things” in the head like icebergs or rocks or awkwardly shaped pieces of furniture – it’s as if all the nouns were there but the verbs were lacking – if you know what I mean, And I can’t help having the theory that if they are juggled around hard enough and long

⁶⁵ Ibid. P.5.

enough some bit of electricity will occur, just by friction, that will arrange everything...⁶⁶

Indeed, there is a sense of transcendence that arises from the piling up of things. What starts of as a layering of acute descriptions can achieve something entirely different, not unlike the process that Bishop recognized in the work of Charles Darwin in a letter to Anne Stevenson.

I can't believe we are wholly irrational – and I do admire Darwin – But reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic – and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.⁶⁷

The poem which follows 'In the Waiting Room', 'Crusoe in England', takes us a long way from Worcester, Massachusetts to encounter Robinson Crusoe recollecting his island; "still/un-rediscovered, un-renamable." The

⁶⁶ Quoted in Goldensohn L. (1992) *Elizabeth Bishop : The Biography of a Poetry*, New York: Columbia University Press. P.104.

⁶⁷ Letter to Anne Stevenson reprinted in Schwartz Le. (1983) *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, Ann Arbor: Michigan U.P. P.228.

description of the earth enacted in this poem is unusually surreal for Bishop and possibly reflects some of her observations of Darwin.

The turtles lumbered by, high domed,
hissing like teakettles.

...

The folds of lava, running out to sea,
would hiss. I'd turn. And then they'd prove
to be more turtles.

The beaches were all lava, variegated,
black, red, and white, and gray;
the marble colors made a fine display.

And I had waterspouts. Oh,
half a dozen at a time, far out,
they'd come and go, advancing and retreating,
their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches
of scuffed-up white.⁶⁸

Bishop does more than just describe the island through Crusoe's memories, she provides a commentary on the act of description (again through Crusoe's eyes).

⁶⁸ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. PP.10-11.

Description becomes numbing for Crusoe in the poem. In his nightmares more and more islands emerge from the sea and he has to describe each one.

nightmares of other islands
stretching away from mine, infinities
of islands, islands spawning islands,
like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs
of islands, knowing that I have to live
on each and every one, eventually,
for ages, registering their flora,
their fauna, their geography.⁶⁹

There is an irony in this account as Bishop is frequently “registering” flora and fauna in this and other poems in *Geography III*. This burden of description is one that Bishop took seriously. When questioned about her poem, *The Fish*, she insisted that “I always tell the truth in my poems. With *The Fish*, that’s *exactly* how it happened. It was in Key West, and I *did* catch it just as the poem says.”⁷⁰ When critics questioned the contents of the February 1918 edition of *National Geographic* (which does contain volcanoes but no images of naked African women) Bishop claimed that she had got the issues confused (rather than simply denying the

⁶⁹ Ibid. P.16.

⁷⁰ Edelman L. (1993) The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'in the Waiting Room'. In: Lombardi MM (ed) *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Charlottesville, VA.: University Press of Virginia, 91-107. P.91.

importance of the intent behind the question). The factual was important for Bishop.

In her attempt to “place” her poetry by means of such comments, Bishop reproduces a central gesture of the poetry itself. For that poetry, in Bishop’s master-trope, takes place beneath the aegis of “geography,” a study of places that leads her, invariably, to the question of poetic positioning – a question that converges, in turn, with the quest for, and questioning of, poetic authority... , Bishop undertakes to authenticate her work, and she does so, tellingly, by fixing its origin on the solid ground of literality – a literality that Bishop repeatedly identifies as “truth.”⁷¹

Bishop was frequently referred to by critics as a kind of travel writer. They claimed her poems were prose-like, simple and full of observed detail. They are poems, it is suggested, that are often based on the assertion “I was there, and this is what I saw”. Lorrie Goldensohn accounts for Bishop’s detailed observations of the physical facts of place arguing that she forms her poems “using descriptions of place through full, loving, naturalistic detail”.⁷² Anne Stevenson suggested that “Whatever ideas emerge have not arrived at over a period of time but perceived, it would seem, in passing. They are the by-products of her

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Goldensohn L. (1992) *Elizabeth Bishop : The Biography of a Poetry*, New York: Columbia University Press. P.101.

meticulous observations".⁷³ Clearly there is something of Bishop in Crusoe and something of Darwin in Bishop. But Bishop did not just look and "register" the things of the world, she also reflected on the very act of registering – and describing.

A many-layered act of description occurs in 'Poem'. Here the focus is on a small painting - a landscape already "described" by the painter and now doubly described by the poet.

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled brown houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple
- that gray-blue wisp – or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two miniscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.⁷⁴

This is a characteristic list from Bishop. The buildings and animals listed one by one. But there is more going on. Bishop is also describing the way

⁷³ Stevenson A. (1966) *Elizabeth Bishop*, New York,: Twayne Publishers. P.31.

⁷⁴ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. P.23.

the elements in the list are already described by the artist: “two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows”. In addition, Bishop adds a moment of hesitation or doubt into her own, less confident, description: “Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple /- that gray-blue wisp – or is it?” The “or is it?” here alerts us to a level of uncertainty that clashes against Bishop’s stated concern for the fidelity of facts. The description continues, repeating the interlacing of listed things, commentary on the way it has been represented by the painter, and her own thinking process.

Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,

fresh-squiggled from the tube.

The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring

clear as gray glass: a half inch of blue sky

below the steel-gray storm clouds.

(They were the artist’s specialty.)

A specklike bird is flying to the left

Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?⁷⁵

The poem, like many of Bishop’s poems, seems simple at first – a description of a painting written in clear, plain language. It becomes, however, an intricate many-leveled commentary of the act of description and, later, the act of remembering. The doubt of “or is it?” is reinforced by

⁷⁵ Ibid. PP.36-37.

a second “Or is it...” These raise questions about the veracity of Bishop’s acts of description – a point made by Mark Doty in reference to ‘The Fish’.

This hesitation reveals that what's been stated so far isn't necessarily authoritative; each descriptive act is one attempt to render the world, subject to revision. Perception is provisional; it gropes, considers, hypothesizes. *Saying* is now a problematic act, not a given; one might name what one sees this way, but there's also that one, and that one. And if we're not certain what we should say, can we be certain what we've seen? A degree of self-consciousness, of uncertainty, has entered the project of description.⁷⁶

The uncertainty continues in ‘Poem’ when the narrator is jolted out of an aesthetic contemplation into one of memory as she recognizes the depicted scene as a place from her childhood. But still, the mapping of the things described on to the world is not certain as we now have three forms of distancing in the act of description. There is the distance created by the artist rendering a landscape, the distance created by the narrator attempting to interpret the painting and then the distance created by time and memory. This third level of distance is once again written into the poem through gestures of uncertainty. She can “almost remember the farmer’s name” and “Would that be Miss Gillespie’s house?”

⁷⁶ Doty M. (2010) A Tremendous Fish. *New England Review-Middlebury Series* 31: 58-66. P.61.

The levels at which people can know a place are the subject of the rest of 'Poem' which lingers on the strangeness of two different visions of one place coinciding – but not entirely coinciding thanks to the intervention of time. The poem ends by returning to the world of 'things'.

I never knew him. We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).

Our visions coincided – "visions" is
too serious a word – our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life" and life itself,
life and memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?

Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, in a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail
– the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.

About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,

the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.⁷⁷

The accumulation of detail in Bishop's poems appears to enact an attempt to get close to the world but the language keeps reaffirming distance. The actor at the centre of Bishop's poems is more observer and less participant. Frequently, in *Geography III*, Bishop's narrator is observing through some intervening screen. In *Poem* she is looking at a place via a painting and her own memories. In 'The Moose' and 'Night City' she is looking through the windows of moving forms of transport – a bus and a plane respectively. These intervening screens make the process of listing 'things' tend to affirm a lack of direct contact with the world beyond – a spatialisation of the kind of distancing that occurs through removal in time, in acts of memory.

Bishop's acts of description are a lot more than 'mere' description. Rather they are enactments of a kind of distancing in space and time. They are acts of description that allow objects their own life and do not subsume them into a symbol for something else. This brings us back to the idea of topopoetics. Description is one way of engaging with place through writing. Places are made up of things – they have a material presence – and vivid descriptions of these things start the process of allowing the reader to enter into the places being described. What we have in *Geography III* is a representation of the (partial) failure to engage with

⁷⁷ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. PP.38-39.

place. Description produces a distance in Bishop's hands, as much as it produces an engagement. It is a kind of homeless gaze. In Helen Vendler's account of Bishop's poetry she reflects on the role of home and homelessness in the work:

Bishop was both fully at home in, and fully estranged from, Nova Scotia and Brazil.... Nova Scotia represented a harsh pastoral to which, though she was rooted in it, she could not return. Brazil, on the other hand, was a place of adult choice, where she bought and restored a beautiful eighteenth-century house in Ouro Prêto. It was yet another pastoral, harsh in a different, tropical way – a pastoral exotic enough to interest her noticing eye but one barred to her by language and culture.⁷⁸

Vendler suggests that this geography – this biography – inflects Bishop's writing, giving it its mode of observation. Vendler suggests that it is Bishop's unsuccessful attempt to find a sense of home that produces a distanced sense of being-in-the-world.

A foreigner everywhere, and perhaps with everyone, Bishop acquired the optic clarity of the anthropologist, to whom the local gods are not sacred, the local customs not second nature.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Vendler H. (1987) The Poems of Bishop, Elizabeth. *Critical Inquiry* 13: 825-838. P.828.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

This brings us to the second of the questions from Lesson VI of *First Lessons in Geography*.

II. *What is the Earth?* The planet or body on which we live.

If the first question of Lesson VI leads us to the role of description in Bishop's topo-poetics then this reading is made more complex by the next question – *What is the Earth?* The answer essentially tells us that earth is our *home*. It is where we live. Home often suggests an ideal kind of place – the ultimate form of Heideggerian *dwelling*.⁸⁰ Most often this place exists at a small scale – the house as home, or neighbourhood perhaps. But here the earth (all of it) is where we live. So the answer, in a way which prefigures the poems to come, produces a tension between homely roots and wandering routes.

Reading the poems in *Geography III* back through the lens of the epigraph sets up abiding questions of the role of place (and particularly home-place) in the poems. The poems provide often-detailed descriptions of places – most often in a slightly detached way even when the places are quite intimate. They explore what it is to make a home, or be homeless, in a world which is frequently travelled across. They explore what Yi-Fu Tuan would later identify as the central theme of the discipline of geography – “the study of earth as the home of people”. In his essay, ‘A View of Geography’, Tuan explores the three terms ‘earth’, ‘home’ and

⁸⁰ Heidegger M. (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York,: Harper & Row, Malpas J. (2012a) *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place : Explorations in the Topology of Being*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

'people' before asserting that 'home' is the most important of the three ideas. Geography, for Tuan, is about how people make the earth into a home. The idea of home, as an ideal version of place, carries a lot of weight.

Home obviously means more than a natural or physical setting. Especially, the term cannot be limited to a built place. A useful point of departure for understanding home may be not its material manifestation but rather a concept: home is a unit of space organized mentally and materially to satisfy a people's real and perceived basic biosocial needs and, beyond that, their higher aesthetic-political aspirations.⁸¹

At one level, Bishop's poems can be read as the always failing search for home written by a woman who travelled a great deal – a woman who was born in New England, lost her mother at an early age, grew up in Nova Scotia, returned to New England and lived in Florida, Brazil and Mexico before her death in New York City. In an interview she was asked if writing poetry is a way of finding or having a home.

⁸¹ Tuan Y-F. (1991) A View of Geography. *Geographical Review* 81: 99-107. P.102.

I've never felt particularly homeless, but, then, I've never felt particularly at home. I guess that's a pretty good description of a poet's sense of home. He carries it within him.⁸²

Even when she was apparently living in one place her life was one of travel.

In 1934-1935, she was intermittently in New York; in 1935, summering in Brittany, wintering in Paris. 1936 brought a visit to London, travel in North Africa and Spain; part of the winter of 1936-37 was spent on the west coast of Florida, then went fishing in Key West, then a tour of Ireland with friends, back to Paris for six months of 1937, and on to Provence and Italy.⁸³

This would seem like a considerable and exhausting amount of travel even now but must have been quite a feat in the 1930s. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Geography III*, a book written towards the end of a life of travel, exhibits a worldweary kind of homesickness brought on by life-long wanderlust. But there is at least one additional level to Bishop's homesickness. As a lesbian Bishop faced more impediments to finding a home in the world. Her geography was that of a gay woman in

⁸² Johnson A. (1996 [1978]) *Geography of the Imagination*. In: Monteiro G (ed) *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*. University Press of Mississippi, 98-104. P.102.

⁸³ Goldensohn L. (1992) *Elizabeth Bishop : The Biography of a Poetry*, New York: Columbia University Press. P.103.

heteronormative space.⁸⁴ The repetition of heterosexuality through everyday acts of affection between men and women produces space in which heterosexuality is seen as 'normal' and 'natural'. Space, in this sense, becomes normative to a degree that acts that do not conform are simply 'out of place'. The world which Bishop inhabited must have been particularly heteronormative and Bishop remained mostly secretive about her sexuality and personal life. It is difficult to avoid reading this aspect of Bishop's life into the search for a way of living on the earth that is reflected in *Geography III*.

The most formally innovative poem in *Geography III* is '12 O'Clock News'. In this prose-poem Bishop juxtaposes objects from a writer's desk on the left hand margin with paragraphs describing a far-off place that combines elements of Bishop's experience of living in Brazil with passages reminiscent of the Vietnam War. The prose is written in the voice of a condescending, ill-informed journalist. The poem starts with the gooseneck lamp – the writer's implement that sheds light on a desk – making an intimate place out of the dark space which surrounds. This is juxtaposed with a passage about the moon and its dim light: "Visibility is poor. Nevertheless, we shall try to give you some idea of the lay of the land and the present situation". Each familiar object acts as a metaphor for some feature of the far away land. The typewriter is an escarpment, a pile of manuscripts is a landslide. Beside *envelopes* we read:

⁸⁴ Valentine G. (1996) (Re)Negotiating the 'Heterosexual Street': Lesbian Productions of Space. In: Duncan N (ed) *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 125-154. P.125.

In this small, backward country, one of the most backward left in the world today, communications are crude and “industrialization” and its products almost nonexistent. Strange to say, however, signboards are on a truly gigantic scale.⁸⁵

In ‘12 O’Clock News’ approaches a humourous form of geo-political critique. The accounts of this faraway country are clearly absurd but couched in the language of media reporting. The place is being described as backward and marginal – a long way from the familiarity of the writer’s desk, illuminated by a gooseneck lamp. This tension between the familiar and the strange is one that pervades *Geography III* and which provides a way into Bishop’s handling of her own wandering homelessness. Her handling of the idea of home as place (the earth as *lived*) is most directly approached in ‘The Moose’, ‘The End of March’ and ‘One Art’.

The key moment in *The Moose*, following on from her account of the inside and outside of a coach during a journey south from Nova Scotia, is when a moose emerges from the ‘impenetrable wood” and meets the coach with its traveling people.

A moose has come out of

⁸⁵ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. P.33.

the impenetrable wood
and stands there, looms, rather,
in the middle of the road.
It approaches: it sniffs at
the bus's hot hood.

Towering, antlerless
high as a church
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).
A man's voice assured us
"Perfectly harmless . . ."

Some of the passengers
Exclaim in whispers,
Childishly, softly,
"Sure are big creatures."
"It's awful plain."
"Look! It's a she!"⁸⁶

This passage enacts two moments of estrangement. The moose is one of the many animals that appear in Bishop's poems as stand-ins for her own estranged marginality. The moose, who is identified clearly as female, is

⁸⁶ Ibid. PP.29-30.

confronted with the strangeness of a bus with its gasoline scents. The bus and its load are, in the moose's world, foreign and other-worldly. The moose is a moment of rupture for the narrator, the driver and the other passengers. The forest is the place of the moose – its home. And the home is impenetrable from the perspective of the narrator. From one perspective the wood stands in for home and place more generally. The moose has a home that is ungraspable for the narrator as, perhaps, all homes are. It is not described in detail. It is simply unfathomable – as the notion of home is throughout *Geography III* and Bishop's poetry more generally. It is a space that Bishop, with all her descriptive powers, cannot penetrate. It is like all the other places and homes that Bishop has described, in a distanced way, throughout the journey – the “red gravelly roads”, “rows of sugar maples”, “clapboard churches/ bleached, ridged as clamshells”. The description of the moose as “high as a church / homely as a house” mirrors these earlier descriptions of the view from the bus which include both “clapboard churches” and the distanced (seen through two windows – the bus window and the window of a house) images of domesticity:

One stop at Bass River.

Then the Economies –

Lower, Middle, Upper;

Five Island, Five Houses,

Where a woman shakes a tablecloth

out after supper.⁸⁷

Bishop's finely (but fleetingly) observed details of a distanced domestic scene seem to contrast with her world. The moose who is "as safe as houses" appears to Bishop as more immediately 'homely' than an actual home. The moose hovers between a sense of strangeness (it is "otherworldly") and a sense of familiarity (it is "homely"). Bishop allows the moose to remain somewhere beyond her act of description – it cannot be completely interpreted. As Mark Doty has written, "our acts of description are both bridges to animal life and evidence of our distance from them. The very tool we reach for to approach them holds us at bay."⁸⁸ Doty's account of descriptions of animals in Bishop apply equally well to the role played by description throughout Bishop's work. It is a tool used not merely to describe – but to enact an attempt (always failing) to belong.

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

⁸⁷ Ibid. P.25.

⁸⁸ Doty M. (2010) A Tremendous Fish. *New England Review-Middlebury Series* 31: 58-66. P.66.

“Curious creatures,”
says our quiet driver,
rolling his r’s.
“Look at that, would you.”
Then he shifts gears.
For a moment longer,

by craning backward,
the moose can be seen
on the moonlit macadam;
and there’s a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.⁸⁹

The most direct attempt to describe a sense of home – the inhabited earth – is found in ‘The End of March’. In this poem we go on a walk along a beach in cold weather. At the end of the walk there is a boarded up house – a house that the narrator imagines as her own.

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,

⁸⁹ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. PP.30-31.

a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
or – are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
At night, a *grog à l'américaine*.
I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
and lovely diaphanous blue flame
would waver, doubled in the window.
There must be a stove; there *is* a chimney,
askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly
– at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes the whole affair
to something off behind the dunes.
A light to read by – perfect! But – impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold
even to get that far,

and of course the house was boarded up.⁹⁰

Just as the moose transgresses a spatial border – the edge of an “impenetrable wood” - so the boarded up house exists on a margin – the line dividing land from sea – a line we will return to below. “The light to read by” mirrors the gooseneck lamp in ‘12 O’Clock News’, presenting the image of a small pool of light separating a known, lived place from the surrounding world. The image is “perfect, but impossible”. The parenthetical comment “Many things about this place are dubious” underlines the impossibility of this place. Bishop is homeless and this is just the dream of a house, late in life, to see out her days. In addition to the parenthetical comment there are the characteristic doubts and hesitations signaled by the line “or – are they railroad ties”. The house both inhabits a line between land and sea and is itself lacking in certainty. It is a dream of homeliness that only underscores Bishop’s existential homelessness.

This sense of being removed from home as place is powerfully reinforced in the best-known poem in *Geography III*, the villanelle ‘One Art’, which considers the “art of losing”. The poem moves through a number of relatively inconsequential losses – “lost door keys, the hour badly spent” gradually ratcheting up the significance of loss with reference to places at ever-larger scales.

⁹⁰ Ibid. PP.43-44.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.⁹¹

'One Art' is placed between 'Poem' – looking back on Nova Scotia through a painting – and 'The End of March' with its impossible dream house on a beach. The line "And look! my last, or / next-to-last, of three loved houses went" points to the possibility of a future loved house such as the impossible one in 'The End of March'. 'One Art' frankly catalogues lost places which Bishop misses. The final stanza brings the loss of place home by introducing the loss of a loved one.

– Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.⁹²

⁹¹ Ibid. P.40.

Bishop's evocation of not-quite-finding homeplace combines a life spent travelling with a series of personal relationships filled with difficulty and loss. Her father dies when she was very young. Her mother was placed in a mental asylum. She was raised by her grandparents. She struggled with alcoholism. Bishop's moves around the world were accompanied by long-term relationships with women. She lived with Louise Crane in Key West and then with Lota de Mecedo Soares in Petropolis, Brazil. Soares committed suicide in 1967 and Bishop returned to the United States. Throughout her life Bishop generally avoided directly using the details of her personal life in her poetry. Despite this, it is possible to see the ways in which a life spent dealing with loss and relationships that were marginalised influenced the themes of her work. The answer to the question, "What is the earth" is "the planet or body on which we *live*." This answer underlined the importance of dwelling – of habitation. Bishop presents us, through her poems, with an attempt to dwell in the face of many challenges posed by constant travel and by a series of difficult, ultimately failed, relationships. One of these relationships was her relationship to place.

III *Of what is the Earth's surface composed? Land and water.*

Water, and the lines that separate land from water, feature heavily in Bishop's poetry. The last question from Monteith's *Lesson VI* also foreshadows (and looks back on) the coastal geographies of much of

⁹² Ibid. P.41.

Bishop's work. Worlds where land meets water arise again and again starting with the accounts of the coast in 'The Map':

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
drawing it unperturbed around itself?
Along the fine tan sandy shelf
is the land tugging at the sea from under?⁹³

Land and water – the answer to the question “Of what is the Earth’s surface composed?” make their appearance as two of the first four words in Bishop’s work. And the poem immediately introduces the uncertainty of the littoral zone – the edge of land and sea which is always changing (suggested, in different ways, by shadows and shallows). The weeds muddy the line of separation – suggesting land in the sea – blurring the green of the land and blue of the sea. This uncertainty is underlined later in the poem where Bishop writes “The names of seashore towns run out to sea” – a line that describes the way typography (place names) are strung out over the physical and political geography that a map describes. The place names literally cross the land/sea boundary. This realm of uncertainty becomes important for Bishop’s sense of place. But so does

⁹³ Bishop E. (1983) *Complete Poems*: London : Chatto & Windus. P.3.

the more straightforward sense of the sea as a space of voyage – unmarked by the contours and sites that the land boasts. Bishop travelled on ships (most notably to Brazil) and knew how to sail well by the age of 18.

All her life, she lived on or near the ocean, and she loved to fish and to swim, “I love to go fishing, you know – any kind of fishing,” she wrote to her Aunt Grace in 1963 when she was planning a visit to Nova Scotia (...). Her 1932 Newfoundland travel diary mentions a sudden high dive into a gorge “amid loud cries” when a schooner sailed into sight of a swimmer clad as nature intended (...). A friend recalled “very clearly” from a student summer on Cape Cod that Bishop said, “If anything ever happens to me, take me to the ocean.”⁹⁴

Bishop’s repeated use of land/sea boundaries in her poems led Jo Shapcott to consider this an ideal kind of topos for a poet who feels detached from place. Reflecting on her own experience of growing up in a place where everyone appeared to be from somewhere else and where there was a distinct absence of the kinds of ‘vowel meadows’ in a Seamus Heaney poem, Shapcott calls Bishop “an anti-geography teacher” who provides a shifting topography for (particularly) women writers.

⁹⁴ Cook E. (2009) Elizabeth Bishop's Cartographic Imagination Once More: Rereading "the Map". In: Burt S and Halpren N (eds) *Something Understood: Essays and Poetry for Helen Vendler*. Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 207-226. P.208.

Borders and edges of territory and language, home and body, land and water have always offered some of the most attractive hideouts for women writers who have long understood that the secret might be simply to let the other in or to sift through whatever flotsam washes up.⁹⁵

To Shapcott, the littoral zone provides a space in which it is possible to be a poet for whom “place and language are less certain and for whom shifting territories are the norm”.⁹⁶ The land/water border, then, provides an ideal kind of place for a female poet negotiating her place in the world.

Geography III has its fair share of water. ‘Crusoe in England’ features any number of islands, some of which are newly emerging from the sea. ‘The Moose’ starts in Nova Scotia “home of the long tides/where the bay leaves the sea”. ‘The End of March’ takes place on a beach. The place where land meets water is indeterminate. The actions of waves and tides makes any sense of a clear line of separation impossible. This sense of indeterminacy – of constant temporal shift – is highlighted in the way Bishop describes watery worlds. We enter ‘The Moose’ with images of constantly moving water/land boundaries:

⁹⁵ Shapcott J. (2002) *Confounding Geography*. In: Anderson LR and Shapcott J (eds) *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 113-118. P.118.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* P.115.

From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea,
home of the long tides
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herrings long rides,

where if the river
enters or retreats
in a wall of brown foam
depends on if it meets
the bay coming in,
the bay not at home;

where, silted red,
sometimes the sun sets
facing a red sea,
and others, veins the flats'
lavender, rich mud
in burning rivulets:⁹⁷

The use of the metaphorical term “burning rivulets” reminds us of
another passage of liquid lava emerging from a volcano in ‘In The Waiting

⁹⁷ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. P.22.

Room' where the young Elizabeth reads *National Geographic* and sees images of over-spilling "rivulets of fire". In a collection marked by plain words the recurrence of a term like 'rivulets' marks it out as important. It enacts the transgression of inside and outside, or solid and liquid. This image of liquid indeterminacy occurs elsewhere too. 'Crusoe in England' returns repeatedly to images of sea and land emerging from each other. It opens with land terraforming from sea due to volcanic activity (reminding us, again, of the volcanoes in 'In the Waiting Room').

A new volcano has erupted,
the papers say, and last week I was reading
where some ship saw an island being born:
at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;
and then a black fleck – basalt, probably – ⁹⁸

The undiscovered and unnamed island that Crusoe had been stranded on hovers between solid and liquid in a different way.

My island seemed to be
a sort of cloud-dump. All the hemisphere's
left-over clouds arrived and hung
above the craters – their parched throats
were hot to touch.
Was that why it rained so much?⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ibid. P.9.

Here an island appears as a watery, cloudy apparition – a “cloud-dump”. The image suggests an almost non-existent land – a mirage where the water of sea meets atmospheric moisture. The apparition-like island has, we have learned, remained “un-rediscovered, un-renamable” – perhaps it never even existed. On the island there is constant movement between land and sea enacted by surreal hissing turtles.

And why sometimes the whole place hissed?

The turtles lumbered by, high-domed,
hissing like teakettles

(And I’d have given years, or taken a few,
for any sort of kettle, of course.)

The folds of lava, running out to sea,
would hiss. I’d turn. And then they’d prove
to be more turtles.

The beaches were all lava, variegated,
black, red and white, and gray;
the marbled colors on fine display.

Here, the turtle appears as a creature that transgresses the water/land boundary – like the place names in ‘The Map’. It is one of many such creatures in Bishop’s poetry, which frequently returns to fish out of water, crabs and other inhabitants of the in-between. In addition to the

⁹⁹ Ibid. P.10.

general vapour-like appearance of Crusoe's island and the presence of water/land creatures, there are the waterspouts – vague forms that, like the tide in 'The Moose', advance and retreat.

And I had waterspouts. Oh,
half a dozen at a time, far out,
they'd come and go, advancing and retreating,
their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches
of scuffed-up white.

Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated,
sacerdotal beings of glass ... I watched
the water spiral up in them like smoke.

Beautiful, yes, but not much company.¹⁰⁰

'The End of March' is the poem most clearly focused on the land/sea margin, located, as it is, on a beach. It is not just a beach though – it is a tidal space and Bishop emphasizes its tidal, changing nature where water is both "withdrawn" and "indrawn".

It was cold and windy, scarcely a day
to take a walk on that long beach.
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones of twos.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. P.11.

This is the space in which Bishop located her imaginary home – her proto/crypto dreamhouse - the impossible home where she might spend the rest of her days on the margin of land and sea.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have seen how Bishop uses the simple questions and answers from a geography textbook to construct an approach to having (or not having) a place in the world. Bishop's acts of description, while seemingly simple at first, reveal a paradoxical sense of attachment to the world and distancing from it. The act of description, with its frequent moments of doubt, is not mere description but an enactment of (failed) attachment. It is one way in which Bishop inhabits – lives – her world.

This world is one which frequently locates itself on a margin – the margin of land and water or the edge of an impenetrable forest. These margins are often transgressed by some object or creature that stands in for the rootless, travelling Bishop. Rather than describing herself Bishop enacts distance through reference to others – other people or, most often, other creatures.

While it would be a mistake to consider Bishop's poems as entirely autobiographical it would be equally foolhardy to not take the circumstances of Bishop's life into account. It is impossible to consider the themes of dwelling and place in *Geography III* without considering

¹⁰¹ Ibid. P.42.

Bishop's troubled life as a young girl deprived of parents who later struggled with alcohol. While the facts of her wandering life undoubtedly coloured her placeless perspective on place and home, her lesbian identity seem equally important in understanding her strained relationship to home and place. How do you find a place in the world when you are displaced in so many ways? Home is not just a universal ideal, in the sense that Tuan used it in his definition of geography. Home is a tense place – a place of tension. This may be particularly true when we consider the role of home in the life of lesbians.

Certainly, lesbian homes can be a place of refuge and sheltering invisibility. Existing in an environment of fairly frequent discrimination and harassment, it would be naïve to argue otherwise, But for some lesbians, home is also a site where they make their sexual identity visible in a conscious attempt to challenge assumptions of heterosexuality and to contest societal pressures to confine and hide lesbian sexuality with private spaces (...). These homes are places in which to nurture, maintain and actively assert lesbian identity. At the same time, the lesbian home encompasses contradictory meanings, The home might be a place of affirmation, a place where a lesbian feels most comfortable expressing her sexuality. Simultaneously, it is often a place to

which such expressions are rigidly confined by societal disapproval and harassment.¹⁰²

One way of thinking about the ways in which lesbians have made home in a heteronormative world is through the construction of 'closet space'.¹⁰³ In her ground-breaking work, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick recounts how the word 'homosexual' arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century producing a "world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or a female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence".¹⁰⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, and certainly by 1911, when Bishop was born, "there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted as secrecy: the perfect object for the by now insatiably exacerbated epistemological/sexual anxiety of the turn-of-the-century subject".¹⁰⁵ This inscription of gay sexuality as secrecy sedimented into the highly spatialised metaphor of the closet as a space within which gay people could remain secret and 'coming out' as a spatial metaphor for the

¹⁰² Elwood SA. (2000) Lesbian Living Spaces: Multiple Meanings of Home. In: Valentine G (ed) *From Nowhere to Everywhere: Lesbian Geographies*. London: Routledge, 11-28. P.12.

¹⁰³ Brown MP. (2000) *Closet Space : Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe*, London ; New York: Routledge.

¹⁰⁴ Sedgwick EK. (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press. P.2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. P.73.

revelation of that secret. The closet should not be read as a discrete place, however, and neither should 'coming out' be thought of as an act that happens only once. The binary of homo- and hetero-sexuality acts across a human landscape in time and space meaning that:

...every encounter with a new classfull of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not.¹⁰⁶

This was a world that Bishop lived in. It would be foolish to read every line of Bishop's work through the lens of this landscape. Indeed, such a reading would reaffirm the epistemology that Sedgwick is describing (and then attempting to undo). It would be equally foolish, however, to ignore what must have been the extraordinary significance of Bishop's sexual identity to her search for the answer to the question "what is the earth?"

We have seen how there is an abundance of details of place in Bishop's poems but, at the same time, an absence of place as a centre of meaning and field of care. This is one way in which Bishop produces an effect of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. P.68.

distancing and un-belonging. Another way she writes displacement and marginality into her poems is through a focus on places, people and animals that are obviously marginal or transgressive of some clear spatial boundary.

Adrienne Rich has written about Bishop's avoidance of intimate detail in her poetry and how she replaces and displaces this intimacy through a "series of poems examining relationships between people who are, for reasons of difference, distanced."¹⁰⁷ One example of this displacement occurs in 'Crusoe in England'.

Just when I thought I couldn't stand it
another minute longer, Friday came.
(Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)
Friday was nice.
Friday was nice, and we were friends.
If only he had been a woman!
I wanted to propagate my kind,
and so did he, I think, poor boy....
– Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Rich A. (1983) *The Eye of the Outsider: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop*. *Boston Review* 8: 15-17. P.16.

¹⁰⁸ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. P.16.

In this passage the lonely Crusoe, destined to a life of “registering” fauna and flora, is joined by Friday. The issue of homoerotic desire is displaced by Bishop to two men on an island. As Joanne Feit Diehl has suggested: “Casting her story as Crusoe’s enabled Bishop to deal with subjects that would otherwise remain unspoken because they were too overly threatening or simply too overt. Crusoe’s “poor little island’s still / unrediscovered, unrenamable” because it is both self-created and unique, a terrain of psychic origins known and recognized only by the self.”¹⁰⁹Bishop’s topoetics is one of strangeness at home and homeseeking when away. It is a search for knowledge of place – the distanced search of a rootless, homeless anthropologist. Or geographer.

¹⁰⁹ Diehl JF. (1993) Bishop's Sexual Politics. In: Lombardi MM (ed) *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Charlottesville, VA.: University Press of Virginia, 17-45..

Chapter Three

John Burnside and the Poetry of Betweenness.

(The Asylum Dance, 2000)

The Asylum Dance was published in 2000 and was the winner of the Whitbread Prize for poetry in that year. It was also shortlisted for the T S Eliot and Forward Prizes. While it continued to deal with themes that are a constant through Burnside's poetry – the natural world, the body and a sense of the mystical and sacred, it also marked a break as Burnside began to play with form in ways that were not apparent in his earlier collections. The poems mix lyricism with adventurous use of spacing and line-breaks. In this essay I focus on the theme of in-betweenness in the long poems of the collection – particularly the sense of being in and of place on the one hand, and always wishing to be elsewhere on the other. We saw in chapter two how Elizabeth Bishop negotiated place through a distanced view which suggested a series of failed attempts to find home. This reflection on failed *dwelling* has also been noted in Burnside's poetry by Roderick Watson who has written of Burnside's "continuing sense of being haunted by a feeling of "home" as something that we seek, and may even inhabit, but can never truly possess."¹¹⁰ The key terms in this essay are "betweenness" and "liminality". They reflect a concern Burnside has expressed for betweenness as a space where identities are formed and where interesting things happen.

¹¹⁰ Watson R. (2007) *The Literature of Scotland*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. P.320

The spaces between the self and the other where everything takes place have long been a source of fascination for poets and myth-makers. To take one example: the Celts, or at least those Celts who once inhabited the British Isles, and informed much of what still remains as an identifiably Scots/Irish/Welsh/Cornish culture, recognised a space which they called, (in Irish), *idir eathara*, that is, a boundary that is neither one place nor another, but the space between the two, that space which Humphrey has identified as the point where everything that is interesting in Nature happens.¹¹¹

Burnside gives us plenty of clues as to his intent in writing the poems in *The Asylum Dance*. It includes the following epigraph from Martin Heidegger.

The proper dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*. What if man's hopelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *proper* plight of dwelling as *the* plight? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling.

¹¹¹ Burnside J. *Poetry and a Sense of Place*. Available at: <http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/1/burnside.html>.

This passage comes from Heidegger's 1951 essay, 'Building, Thinking, Dwelling'¹¹². Here Heidegger develops his familiar theme of "dwelling" – of being-in-the-world. The passage is characteristically circuitous suggesting that we are not even aware that we have a problem –that we do not know how to dwell - to be-in-the-world. If we were to become aware of this issue, Heidegger tells us, then the problem might become less of one. It seems likely that this kind of thinking lies at the heart of *The Asylum Dance*. Dwelling, for Heidegger, is an ideal form of living authentically. It concerns living in place that is rooted – place that allows us to be an existential insider. Heidegger, throughout his career, had struggled with the nature of "being". To Heidegger to be was to be *somewhere*. The word he used to describe this was *Dasein* – or "being there". Note this was not simply being in some abstract sense, as if in a vacuum, but being *there*. Human existence is existence *in the world*. This idea of being-in-the-world was developed in his notion of *dwelling*. A way of being-in-the-world was to build a world. Dwelling in this sense does not mean simply to dwell in (and build) a house, but to dwell in and build a whole world to which we are attached. Dwelling describes the way we exist in the world – the way we make the world meaningful, or place-like. Most famously Heidegger used the image of a cabin in the Black Forest to describe both building and dwelling.

¹¹² Heidegger M. (1977) *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, New York: Harper & Row.

Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead"-for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum*-and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse.¹¹³

In this cabin everything seemed to have its place and the cabin sat almost organically in the natural world, linking the cosmological to the everyday. Here was the model kind of building and dwelling – a model kind of being-in-the-world. Obviously it is not possible in a modern urban world for everyone to live like this but the model that Heidegger describes becomes a way of thinking about the way we all dwell in the world. When

¹¹³ Heidegger M. (1993) *Basic Writings : From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco. P.300.

we are confronted with a new environment, even the temporarily inhabited seat on a busy train, we do something to make it our own. We place a book on a table, or a bag next to us. Workers in open plan offices attempt to decorate the small piece of pre-fabricated “wall” that surrounds their computer with post cards. They might bring in their own mouse mat or even a pot plant. They try and make a little bit of the world more home like. More like a cabin in the Black Forest.¹¹⁴

Heidegger felt as though modernity and technology had made this kind of dwelling more remote and that human life was thus faced with the possibility of inauthenticity.¹¹⁵ Burnside explores ideas such as this through the poems in *The Asylum Dance*.¹¹⁶ The poems convey through their meaning and form a tension between rooted belonging and the potential of the space beyond home that we have to navigate. This is conveyed at the outset in the opening long poem ‘Ports’

¹¹⁴ It may or may not be relevant that Heidegger was a member of the Nazi party and this kind of imagery was often used in Nazi ideology to create the idea of an Aryan race firmly rooted in the deep organic soils of Germany. This was contrasted with Jews, Gypsies and gay people who were described metaphorically as snakes of the desert and city – with no soil of roots – lacking in “authenticity” see Mosse GL. (1966) *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural, and Social Life in the Third Reich*, New York; Grosset & Dunlap.

¹¹⁵ This idea is developed fully in Relph E. (1976) *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion.

¹¹⁶ There is not a great deal of critical work on John Burnside but one essay that considers Burnside’s work in relation to the problem of dwelling and the ecocritical tradition in general is Borthwick D. (2009) *The Sustainable Male: Masculine Ecology in the Poetry of John Burnside*. In: Ellis H and Meyer J (eds) *Masculinity and the Other: Historical Perspectives*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 63-85.

Our dwelling place:

the lights above the firth

shipping forecasts

gossip

theorems

the choice of a single word to describe

the gun-metal grey of the sky

as the gulls

flicker between the roofs

on Tolbooth Wynd.

Whenever we think of home

we come to this:

the handful of birds and plants we know by name

rain on the fishmonger's window

the walleyed plaice

freckled with spots

the colour of orangeade.¹¹⁷

We enter the collection through 'Ports'. The last poem, our leaving point, is called 'Roads'. For a collection focused on dwelling these are unsettling points of arrival and departure. Place is immediately related to somewhere else – anywhere else. 'Ports' is a long poem in three parts,

¹¹⁷ Burnside J. (2000) *The Asylum Dance*, London: Jonathan Cape. P.1.

'Haven', 'Urlicht' and 'Moorings'. The poems have an irregular appearance on the page. They are constructed of apparently haphazard, scattered lines with plentiful indented lines. This was a break for Burnside, whose previous poems were mostly left aligned in a conventional sense.

Burnside announces at the outset his intentions in the shape of the poem. The first line is broken by both a literal break and a semi-colon. There is very little punctuation in these poems and an extensive use of space in the place of commas or semi-colons. Here we have a colon at the outset. The first line of the first poem is simply "Our dwelling place:", immediately setting the scene and the central theme of the book's central long poems: 'Ports', 'Settlements', 'Fields', 'Roads'. Burnside tells us that this grand and somewhat abstract theme – the theme of dwelling – is encountered through details and small things. A leap is taken from "our dwelling place" to

the handful of birds and plants we know by name
rain on the fishmonger's window
the walleyed plaice
freckled with spots
the colour of orangeade.¹¹⁸

This is one way in which space works in the poem. The very particular, small scale, thing is connected to a much bigger idea – *dwelling* and the spots on a flat fish that resemble the colour of orangeade. This allows the

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

development of a sense of a particular place. It is a paradox that the more universal something appears to be, the fewer people have experienced it. The objective 'view from nowhere' – the omnipotent, god-like view, is the view that has been established as universal (it is the view of 'science') but in fact is known to no-one.¹¹⁹ The only thing that everyone has shared is the *particular* (that which is specific to a place or individual experience). We all have our own *particulars* - our own places and experiences of place. But this experience of difference, that at first blush seems to separate us, actually connects us. We can recognize the experience of the particular even if it is not *our* particular. Even if we do not know the colour of the spots on a plaice or even the colour of orangeade we recognize the attempt. Just as the idea of a "handful of birds and plants we know by name" suggests an intimacy with the world even if we do not know the same birds' names as Burnside. It is an act of poetry to write "egret" or "hummingbird" in a way that cannot be replicated by the generic "bird". It is the act of knowing the specific that provides roots and allows Burnside to relate to the reader. Within these few lines there are two simultaneous spatial moves – one is this vertical move between the view from nowhere and the view from somewhere and the other is the sideways, horizontal move, of metaphor – from plaice to orangeade. Both take us in and out of the time and place.

¹¹⁹ Nagel T. (1986) *The View from Nowhere*, New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Just a few lines earlier Burnside presents us with another list, still in the reader's mind as we encounter the rain and orangeade:

the light above the firth
shipping forecasts
gossip
theorems¹²⁰

This list, as with the earlier list, is separated by space rather than punctuation.

The light above the firth is a specific image and sets up the reader for repeated references to qualities of light through the collection. Shipping forecasts are, of course, evocative of life in a space between land and sea. In many ways they are evocative of life in Great Britain as many of us hear them regardless of our distance from the sea. Gossip is ubiquitous but something we may associate more with a small town. Theorems? Theorems seem out of place in this list – abstract and from the world of science. The final three things in this list are all forms of communicated knowledge that scan in and out of a sense of dwelling – that take us from the world of shipping forecasts ('objective' knowledge often heard on Radio Four as we are preparing dinner) to the world of gossip with its local and particular connotations. Dwelling is being layered in this list.

¹²⁰ Burnside J. (2000) *The Asylum Dance*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Burnside's approach to place has been outlined in an essay in which he makes this paradoxical connection between the particular and universal at the outset.

It may be a very idiosyncratic and personal view, but I would maintain that the purpose of the lyric is to stop time, by somehow conveying the timelessness of the chosen place: paradoxically, this attempt to break the flow of linear time is achieved by focusing very specifically on the moment, (i.e. on transience, which is the space in which linear time disappears).¹²¹

The emphasis here is on time but the same applies to space and place – the ability of the poem to open up the universal through the gate of the particular.

Part II, 'Urlicht',¹²² immediately takes us back to the beginning again with its first lines

- our

dwelling place:

a catalogue of wrecks

and slants of light – ¹²³

¹²¹ Burnside J. *Poetry and a Sense of Place*. Available at: <http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/1/burnside.html>.

¹²² Urlicht means something like 'primal light'. It is also the name of the fourth movement of Mahler's symphony number 2.

Dwelling again, reiterating a central refrain alongside the image of the primal light that runs through the collection. The first “- our” immediately creates a sense of here but also elsewhere by running on from the end of Part 1, with the title in between.

We notice how dark it is
a dwelling place
for something in ourselves that understands
the beauty of wreckage
the beauty
of things unchanged

II URLICHT

- our
dwelling place:
a catalogue of wrecks
and slants of light – ¹²⁴

The line is carried on in horizontal space but is broken in vertical space, not only by the line break but by a section title appearing mid line. The

¹²³ Burnside J. (2000) *The Asylum Dance*, London: Jonathan Cape.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

word dwelling is repeated (and is repeated several more times before the end of the poem). Here the dwelling place is the dark but has “slants of light”. This sets up a certain fuzziness of imprecision – a dark with lights. This zone of uncertainty (and a port is a meeting place, or zone of mixing par excellence) is made more vague by the textures of light and dark that emerge in the poem.

here we have nothing to go on
or nothing more
than light and fog
a shiver in the wind
or how the sky can empty all at once
when something like music comes
or rather
something like the gap between a sound
and silence
like the ceasing of a bell
or like the noise a tank makes as it fills
and overflows.¹²⁵

An intangible sense of indeterminacy is marked by “light and fog” and a “shiver in the wind”. This in-between state is amplified sonically by the idea of a gap between sound and silence and (less successfully) by the

¹²⁵ Ibid.

noise of an overflowing tank. Indeterminacy is marked by the line-break and use of space to suggest indecision.

when something like music comes

or rather

something like the gap between a sound

and silence

like the ceasing of a bell

or like the noise a tanks makes as it fills¹²⁶

It is not just “like music” but “something like music”. It is not just “the gap between a sound/and silence” but something like it. The gap between sound and silence is already a fine interstitial point but this is doubled by being “something like” it. And this sense of gap is made more gaping by the blank space of indented lines that surround the word. This is a poem of gaps.

These gaps and liminal moments are brought to a head in the next passage.

How everyone expects

that moment when a borrowed motor stalls

half-way across the channel

¹²⁶ Ibid.

and you sit
quiet
amazed by the light
aware
of everything
aware of shoals and stars
shifting around you
endlessly

entwined.¹²⁷

Here we are as the engine on a boat stalls. We are half way between things (as we so often are through *The Asylum Dance*). The sound of the engine is fading (like the earlier bell) but it has only stalled, it will start again. The line breaks in mid flow (like the engine) and we are suddenly with the poet - suddenly aware of things in a way that only breakdown (and linebreaks) can induce. The inchoate swarms of shoals and stars are shifting - undefinable. The two line break in vertical space at the end forces us to drop down through blankness between the words “endlessly” and “entwined”.

The formal devices Burnside is using here are continued in ‘Settlements’.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

I A Place by the Sea

Because what we think of as home
is a hazard to others
our shorelines edged with rocks and shallow
sandbanks

reefs

where navigation fails

we mark the harbour out

with lights and noise:

flickers of green and scarlet in the dark

the long moan of a foghorn

when the daylight

thickens and stills

and even when we speak of other things

our prayers include all ships

all those at sea

navigators pilots lobster-crews

the man who is yanked overboard

on a line of creels

whole families of boys and quiet fathers

lost in a sudden squall

a mile from land.

It's not that we surrender to our fear

or trust in nothing

it's just that the darkness

opens

on mornings like this

filling with distance and starlight for mile after mile

when we wake to the taste of milk

and the scent of coal

in rooms bequeathed to us by merchantmen

who stocked the roof with powders

sacks of grain

spicetree and crumbs of saffron

it's not that we are lost

or far from home

it's just that the world

seems strange

on nights like this

when we lie with the ghosts of
ourselves

- these habitual flavours:

aloe and eau de Cologne

and the ribbon of sweetness

that stays on my hands for hours

when I turn

to sleep¹²⁸

'Settlements' is formed from four parts: 'A Place by the Sea', 'Fisherfolk at Newhaven', 'Well' and 'What We Know of Houses'. While the majority of text is left aligned in a conventional way there are many lines which are significantly indented. Part III – 'Well', is an exception as only one line is indented. Every single indented line is positioned exactly under the line break from the line before so the breaks are vertical and not horizontal (as in *Ports*). Punctuation is very sparse. Each section has a full stop at the end. There are no commas except for three in the more conventionally arranged Part III. There are a few colons and semi-colons. An earlier version of this poem, in the *London Review of Books*, did use commas a little more frequently. These observations are generally true of Burnside's poems since *The Asylum Dance*.¹²⁹ Before then Burnside's poems appear to be more conventional in appearance.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

The poem appears on the page as fractured. The general left alignment suggests a degree of rootedness and attachment while the indented lines break this up and suggest a degree of chaos and tension. Incalculability. The alignment of indented lines with the ends of the lines before suggest that this is controlled and not absolute. The poems are left on the edge of breaking up without being allowed to fully do this. In this poem this form appears to represent some of the wildness of a “place by the sea” - a shoreline where the world of water and the world of land varies with the tides and weather – a site of erosion and liminality.¹³⁰ The lack of punctuation means that line breaks have to do more work. In the LRB version of this poem we have the lines

and crumbs of saffron;

its not that we are lost

In the *Selected Poems* the semi-colon is removed and an extra blank line is introduced to replace it in effect – allowing the reader to pause a little more than they might with just a conventional line break.

The lack of punctuation means that grammatically the lines are quite long. The spatial structure of the poem breaks these long lines up

¹³⁰ Turner VW. (1977) *The Ritual Process : Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, Shields R. (1991) *Places on the Margin : Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, London: Routledge Chapman Hall, Gennep Av, Vizedom M and Caffee GL. (1977) *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

into short ones – sometimes single words. There is an interplay between punctuation and space at work here.

In the first stanza there is one indented line.

sandbanks
reefs
where navigation fails¹³¹

Here the use of space reflects the subject matter. A sandbank or a reef presents a kind of barrier in the liminal space between the sea and the land – not yet land and not quite sea. The form mimics this and reinforces it with the reference to the trickiness of navigation in this not sea/not land zone. This, in turn, refers to the first three lines which tell us that our home (Burnside’s home – a place by the sea) is dangerous to others thanks, in part, to the difficulties of navigation. The stanza as a whole sets up a dominant notion in the whole collection of “home” as a site of what Martin Heidegger calls *dwelling*. Here Burnside balances this phenomenological dwelling in dwelling with the sense of hazard to “others” who are not home here. Metaphorically the tricky geography of a place by the sea stands in for all places and the binary of belonging and otherness that they can embody.

¹³¹ Burnside J. (2000) *The Asylum Dance*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Here the inhabitants of the place by the sea are connected (through prayer, through economics, through subsistence) to people elsewhere – the people at sea and their dangerous lives. The spacing of the poem – the indented lines – work to suggest this connection/separation – to “all those at sea” and “a mile from land” – here but not here – present and absent – connected but apart. There are also extra spaces in the list. It is not clear that there is any other reason for this apart from Burnside wants to use a list and does not want to use punctuation – thus the spaces divide the elements in a group of things that are alike. Once again space connects and holds apart.

While these references create a sense of spatial liminality, Burnside also encourages the reader to feel in-between in temporal terms.

flickers of green and scarlet in the dark
the long moan of a foghorn
when the daylight
thickens and stills¹³³

Here Burnside creates a sense of time passing and teetering between night and day – dusk and twilight. Here there are lights in the dark and a light which is thick and close – neither pure darkness not pure light. The indented line, the second in the poem adds to this sense of in-between

¹³³ Ibid.

time. This teetering in time is mirrored in later stanzas. In the fourth stanza we have

It's just that the darkness

opens

on mornings like this

filling with distance and starlight for mile after mile¹³⁴

Once more the use of space – a line that breaks vertically but not horizontally – creates a simultaneous sense of continuity and discontinuity. Night becomes day. Night and day are different but bleed into each other. And then the morning is filled, not with sunlight, but starlight – bringing the night into the day again. The word “opens” gets its own line. Can it bear that weight? Does it deserve it? It is only a line in a vertical sense – not in a horizontal sense. It both is and is not a one-word-line. It is a point where one thing becomes another – darkness becomes morning.

The temporal slippage occurs once more in the sixth/seventh stanza

It's just that the world

seems strange

on nights like this

when we lie with the ghosts of ourselves

¹³⁴ Ibid.

- these habitual flavours:

aloe and eau-de-cologne

and the ribbon of sweetness

that stays on my hands for hours

when I turn

to sleep¹³⁵

Here, at the end of Part I, the poem is at its most spatially fractured. In addition to the indents of lines at different points across the horizontal space of the page, there is the use of a rare colon, an extra line space creating vertical space and a dash. Perhaps this multiplicity of forms of breakage and continuity heighten the feeling of spatial and temporal liminality combined. It is hard to work out why the colon has remained here when it has been removed from the earlier line regarding saffron. But colons and dashes represent different ways of both moving on and stopping at the same time. We are told that this world “seems strange” which sets us up for an in-between kind of feeling. A colon is like a border – a space which separates what came before from what comes after. But like a border, it is also a space where things meet and come together. The dash is less of a border and more of a connection or route. It encourages speed and flow and – as the beginning of a line of three words – contradicts the line break that immediately precedes it. Finally the section ends with a turn – another liminal point – between wakefulness and sleep. The indent emphasizes the nature of turning from one thing to

¹³⁵ Ibid.

another. And there is no full stop. This is the only section of the poem that has no full stop - a suggestion of onward movement – sleeping but not resting.

A series of apparent binaries – either/or distinctions – mark ‘A Place by the Sea’. These include

| | |
|-------|----------------------|
| Home | Journey (navigation) |
| Land | Sea |
| Day | Night |
| Light | Dark |
| Wake | Sleep |

Burnside’s poem navigates these binaries by letting them bleed into one another and by focusing our attention on the spaces in between.

Sandbanks and reefs mark the space between land and sea. Home and journey are entangled in the “habitual” flavours of aloe and eau-de-cologne, spicetree and saffron. These are both of and in the home and quite clearly from elsewhere. Day and night and light and dark are allowed to merge in mornings filled with starlight and air that is thick and still. Night is broken by lights. Burnside leaves us, at the full-stop free end of ‘A Place by the Sea’, at the turn/to sleep.

Conclusion

In *The Asylum Dance* Burnside explores the nature of dwelling – of being-in-the-world – through a focus on the liminal and the in between. In his essay on place and poetry Burnside explores the generative potential of betweenness for lyric poetry. It is in the in-between, he suggests, that identity and dwelling are formed in an ever-changing processual way. They are spaces of becoming as much as being. He explores this in relation to the mythologies of the British Isles and, particularly, the Celtic world that he is a part of.

The legacy of this myth can be seen in much recent Scots and Irish poetry in particular, where a boundary is commonly the specific locus for lyric. This locus may be geographical or topological: the border between one place and another, (in Northern Irish poetry, for example, the boundary between the South and the North), or it may be temporal. Key moments in the calendar are Lammas, Halloween, (the old Celtic New Year), or New Year's Eve, or certain times of day, such as noon or midnight, dawn or dusk. These are the points at which one thing becomes another: the old year becomes the new, summer becomes autumn, day becomes night. They are, in our experience, the moments when the person is susceptible to change, where being is raw, as it were, where identity is less fixed, more open to possibility.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Burnside J. *Poetry and a Sense of Place*. Available at: <http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/1/burnside.html>.

The Asylum Dance navigates these uncertain but generative waters both in its choice of subject matter – its focus on coastlines, entries and exits, liminal times of day – and through use of the space of the page to embody the “points at which one thing becomes another”. The topopoetics of Burnside’s project are clear. The poems are not just *about* the coastlines or landscapes at dusk – they are embodiments of them. The poems are, as Heidegger might insist, forms of uncertain building – they are places in which we, as readers, can dwell in an exploration of an attempt to find home.

Chapter Four

Don McKay and the Phenomenology of Stone

(Strike/Slip, 2006)

Poets are supremely interested in what language can't do; in order to gesture outside, they use language in a way that flirts with its destruction.¹³⁷

Writing is so essential because it slows thought and perception down. This change of speed is quite critical because writing arises in the interaction of self and place and provides the medium through which a knowledge of place is achieved.¹³⁸

In the previous chapter we explored the poetics of John Burnside's *Asylum Dance* as an exploration of the problematic of *dwelling*. Burnside's poems, while finely attuned to the presence of the natural world in place, are fundamentally human poems dealing with life on the margins of land and sea, between staying and leaving. The spatial arrangement of the poems are central. In this chapter we encounter another poetic exploration of dwelling. Here, though, dwelling is imagined as a grasping at/of the wild – of the pre- and extra- human. It is imagined through a

¹³⁷ McKay D. (2001) *Vis à Vis : Fieldnotes on Poetry & Wilderness*, Wolfville, NS: Gaspereau Press. P.32.

¹³⁸ Tilley C. (2004) *The Materiality of Stone : Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, Oxford: Berg. P.223.

continually deferred attempt to reach into and grasp, through words, the being of rock (wild) and stone (humanly used).

Don McKay's 2006 collection, *Strike/Slip* won the Canadian Griffin Prize for poetry in 2006. *Strike/Slip* refers to a kind of fault that is explained in the notes at the back of the book – “a high-angle fault along which rocks on one side move horizontally in relation to rocks on the other side with a shearing motion”.¹³⁹ Many of the poems in the collection refer to these faults directly. McKay spent time “walking and gawking” at Loss Creek on Vancouver Island in British Columbia and then reading geology textbooks. Loss Creek is a site of a strike/slip fault, a series of which run up the west coast of North America. The poems are full of incalculable levels of stress and strain pressing and twisting rocks, layering and folding. This is a poetry of fieldwork, of anticlines and synclines. The themes that recur throughout the collection are the transformation of rock into stone, the problems facing language in grasping the natural world and the relationships between spatiality and temporality. As well as being one of Canada's leading poets, McKay has also written two sets of essays (interspersed with poems) concerning the idea of wilderness. Wilderness is an idea that has less purchase in the self evidently human landscapes of Britain but it has a strong hold on the imagination of North America and Canada in particular.¹⁴⁰ This chapter is an exploration of

¹³⁹ McKay D. (2006) *Strike/Slip*, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart.

¹⁴⁰ Thoreau HD and Atkinson B. (1937) *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, New York,: The Modern Library, Nash R. (1973) *Wilderness and the American Mind*, New Haven,: Yale University Press,

McKay's poems that proceeds in continual conversation with both his own prose writings on wilderness and wider writing on the phenomenology of landscape. It is about the direct connection McKay makes with the land and the simultaneous reiterative 'failure' of words in expressing or making a connection between people and world. Words are central to this version of dwelling and it is in their failure that poetry is born. McKay's poems give a sense that he wishes for a direct communion with 'nature' but recognizes that this way of dwelling in the world we call 'language' cannot attain that. Nevertheless he acknowledges that language is often the best that we can do.

Language *is* already there in poetic attention; like an athlete at her limit, language is experiencing its speechlessness and the consequent need to stretch *itself* to be adequate to this form of knowing.¹⁴¹

In the first half of the poem, 'Loss Creek', McKay alerts us to a central theme in his collection. He invokes the German philosopher and inventor of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, to point to the poetic project of accessing the essential nature of rocks. The poem starts

He went there to have it

Cronon W. (1996) The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature. *Environmental History* 1: 7-28.

¹⁴¹ McKay D. (2001) *Vis à Vis : Fieldnotes on Poetry & Wilderness*, Wolfville, NS: Gaspereau Press..).P.30

exact. The broken prose of the bush roads.
The piles of half-burnt slash. Stumps
high on the valley wall like sconces
on a medieval ruin. To have it tangible.
To carry it as load rather than as mood
or mist. To heft it – earth measure,
rock measure – and feel its raw drag without phrase
for the voice or handle for the hand.
He went there to hear the rapid curls around
the big basaltic boulders saying
husserl husserl, saying I'll
do the crying for you, licking the schists
into flat skippable discs.¹⁴²

“Exact” is a key word here. How does the poet represent a world beyond the cultural? How can he (in this case) access the rockiness of rocks? He wants to “have it/exact” – “To have it tangible./To carry it as load rather than mood/or mist.” The line breaks here point to McKay’s poetry of the tangible. The break between it/exact seems, itself, to be exact. The juxtaposition of ‘load’ and ‘mist’ asks us to compare the solid and weighty with the illusive and intangible. McKay uses weighty, haptic words such as “load”, “heft” and “drag” to stress the density of the world he is encountering – its sheer materiality – “To heft it – earth measure,/rock measure – and feel its raw drag without phrase/for the voice of handle

¹⁴² McKay D. (2006) *Strike/Slip*, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart. P.7.

for the hand.” McKay sets up a contrast between “heft” and “raw drag” on the one hand and “phrase for the voice” or “handle for the hand” on the other. The first are weighty substantive issues, essential to the rockiness of rocks. The second are the ways we attach ourselves to such things and make sense of them – through words or through touch. McKay’s project appears to involve attempting an apprehension of the natural world beyond our human constructions of it. To do so through something as human as poetry is of course Sisyphean. We suspect that he may never heft this boulder to the summit but poetry is produced in the effort.

This is the task of phenomenology – to strip away the arbitrary and get at the core, or essence, of something. Phenomenology “is a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status...It also offers an account of space, time and the world as we ‘live’ them.”¹⁴³ This is how Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. The world is there - available for consciousness - but we still have to put effort into connecting with it, in order to achieve “primitive contact” and “have it/exact”. Phenomenological knowledge is most obviously different from scientific knowledge – what Merleau-Ponty calls the “natural attitude” – a form of perception and knowledge that excludes imagination, emotion

¹⁴³ Merleau-Ponty M. (1962) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. P.7.

and the subjective viewpoint. Scientific knowledge is performed by the god trick of imagining a view from nowhere that is also outside of a body that needs or wants for anything.¹⁴⁴ The phenomenologist, on the other hand, asks how does the world presents itself to us in particular contexts. At the heart of Husserl's original conception of phenomenology was the insight that consciousness is always consciousness "of something". This "ofness" he labeled intentionality. To Husserl this consciousness was a thoroughly mental thing – an attribute of a disembodied mind.¹⁴⁵ To Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, this consciousness is always through our bodies. It is embodied. Merleau-Ponty brings consciousness, and experience in general, out of the clouds and into our hands and feet. This is an anti-idealist philosophy. Christopher Tilley, an archaeologist interested in rocks, stones and their meanings, puts this well:

Precisely because people are physical objects we are able to perceive the world, but there is no purely objective "outside" vantage point for doing so: for example, a disembodied mind outside a particular setting and a flux of temporal events.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Haraway D. (1988) Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14: 575-599, Rorty R. (1991) *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴⁵ Husserl E. (1999) *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic.

¹⁴⁶ Tilley C. (2004) *The Materiality of Stone : Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, Oxford: Berg. P.2.

Knowledge is physical, embodied, and a key part of being in a lived and sensing body. The phenomenologist has to start from exactly the point the scientist denies – the fact that our being is “being-in-the-world”.

McKay plays with the space between a phenomenological sense of heft and the rational perspective of the scientist throughout the collection. This emerges in the shifts in diction which register an energetic attempt to get at the world. The titles of many of the poems could have been lifted straight from a geology class – ‘Gneiss’, ‘Alluvium’, ‘Precambrian Shield’, ‘Devonian’, ‘Varves’.

“STRESS, SHEAR, AND STRAIN THEORIES OF FAILURE”

They have never heard of lift
and are - for no one, over and over – cleft. Riven
recrystallized. Ruined again. The earth engine
driving itself through death after death. Strike/slip,
thrust, and the fault called normal, which occurs
when two plates separate.

Do they hearken unto Orpheus, whose song
is said to make them move? Sure.

This sonnet hereby sings that San Fran-
cisco and L.A. shall, thanks to its chtonian shear,
lie cheek by jowl in thirty million
years. Count on it, mortals. Meanwhile,

may stress shear strain attend us. Let us fail
in all the styles established by our lithosphere.¹⁴⁷

The title of this poem is taken from Charles M. Nevin's *Principles of Structural Geology* according to the notes McKay provides (itself a fairly scientific gesture). It appears boldly at the head of the poem as the antithesis of the poetic yet at the same time its poetry is intense. The 'natural attitude' of science compels us at some point to the abstract and universal – the generation of laws. $E=mc^2$. The poem is riven with science. "Recrystallized", Strike/slip, "the fault called normal, which occurs/when two plates separate", "chtonic shear", "lithosphere". It is unusual to have so many scientific words in one sonnet and yet collectively they manage to produce poetry. Failure is an important word here. One of the themes of the book is the way words continuously fail. Scientific language is as doomed as poetic language (though probably less concerned by this, or as interested in it). This poem and others shift between registers in a way that reflects McKay's belief that "The nature poet may (should, in fact) resort to the field guide or library, but will keep coming back, figuratively speaking, to the trail – to the grain of experience, the particular angle of expression in a face..."¹⁴⁸ The voice of the scientist and the voice of the phenomenologist are not the only voices here. We also have the archaic "hearken unto Orpheus and then a dizzying montage of diction ".chtonic shear, [science]/lie cheek by jowl

¹⁴⁷ McKay D. (2006) *Strike/Slip*, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart. P.33.

¹⁴⁸ McKay D. (2001) *Vis à Vis : Fieldnotes on Poetry & Wilderness*, Wolfville, NS: Gaspereau Press. P.27.

[colloquial] in thirty million/ years. Count on it, mortals [mock heroic, sardonic]. Meanwhile/may stress shear strain [science] attend us. Let us fail/ in all the styles established by our lithosphere [more science suddenly].

There is a sense that the linguistic ingenuity of science is grasping and missing just as the poet is. It is in this missing that McKay locates something he calls wilderness.

By 'wilderness' I want to mean, not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations. That tools retain a vestige of wilderness is especially evident when we think of their existence in time and eventual graduation from utility: breakdown. To what degree do we own our houses, hammers, dogs? Beyond that line lies wilderness. We probably experience its presence most often in the negative as dry rot in the basement, a splintered handle, or shit on the carpet. But there is also the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism. The coat hanger asks a question; the armchair is suddenly crouched: in such defamiliarizations, often arranged as art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind's categories to glimpse some thing's autonomy – its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. P.21.

It is this alien being that results in the reiteration of failure in poetic practice. The words can never quite match the thing in a perfect mimetic way so the poet fails over and over again. To McKay, wilderness is not just in ravens and rocks (though it is certainly in these things) but in hammers and coat-hangers. This recognition of the wildness in the thing being represented is what McKay calls “ontological applause”.

The prose poem, ‘Gneiss’, moves the poet outside of Canada to a monolith in Scotland. Here, again, he returns to a theme of language – this time the language of the tourist guide that asks us to stop and spend some time with some rocks.

GNEISS

On the Isles of Lewis, be sure to stop at Callanish and spend some time at the circle of standing stones erected by our Neolithic ancestors.

- Touring Scotland by Automobile

There is not much raw rock in that sentence, with its persuasive sibilants, not much scarp or grunt to remember the penalties paid – the load of it, the drag, the strained backs, smashed hands, and other proto-industrial industries. It was not so long before this, not one whole afternoon as measured in the lifetimes of those upright slabs, that our ancestors had themselves achieved the perpendicular. Now they required that some of the rocks that comprised their island

should stand up with them against the leveling wind and eroding rain. And further, that they should form lines leading the most common and hopeful of human signs – the circle of connection, of return. They insisted that rock be stone.

From across the heath it appears – and perhaps this testifies to the brilliance of our ancestors as landscape artists – that the amiable rocks have taken this on themselves, getting up as you or I might do, as a sign of respect. By presenting themselves in a rough circle they are simply performing a courtesy, like ships flying the flag of a country they are passing through. They arrange themselves into an image of eternity we crave rather than the brute infinity we fear.

But close up is more likely to be a commotion of stress lines swirling within each slab that clutches at the heart – each stone a pent rage, an agon. None of the uniform grey of limestone, that prehistoric version of ready-mix concrete, in which each laid-down layer adds to the accumulated weight that homogenizes its predecessors. Think instead of Munch's *The Scream* with its contour lines of terror; then subtract the face. Or you could turn on the weather channel to observe those irresponsible isobars scrawling across the planet. Imagine our ancestors tracing these surfaces, whorled fingertip to gnarled rock, reading the earth-energy they have levered into air. They have locked the fury into the fugue and

the car crash into the high school prom. They engineered this dangerous dance. Better stop there. Better spend some time.¹⁵⁰

McKay demonstrates that the language of the travel guide fails spectacularly in its lack of 'grunt' and excessive 's' sounds to get at the essence of these stones. The time that might need to be spent as a tourist is juxtaposed with the temporality of the stones themselves. The 'not one whole afternoon' in rock time that had lapsed between the emergence of upright humans and the arrangements of the menhirs. This is an expansive time echoed later in the contrasting notions of 'eternity' and 'infinity' and returned to at the end with the repeated "Better spend some time". The final paragraph of the poem slips in diction between intense description of the close up view of the gnarled rock (which was used as the cover of the book) and references to the everyday elements of life in modern Canada – "read mix concrete", "the weather channel", "car crash" and "high school prom". These, with the reference to Munch thrown in for good measure, perform the failure of words once again as a kind of grasping for the right register – deflating the potential for a romantic and idealized relationship to nature just as it becomes a threat.

Spending time with rocks is exactly what archaeologist Chris Tilley has been asking other archaeologists to consider. Rather than subjecting monoliths and menhirs to analysis in the lab, or thinking of them in purely visual terms, Tilley suggests spending time in a fully embodied

¹⁵⁰ McKay D. (2006) *Strike/Slip*, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart. PP.38-39.

way with standing stones as part of the landscape. His language is remarkably like McKay's. Tilley compares the scientific techniques of measurement with actual embodied experience

For an empiricist, the properties of an object are external to and independent of each other, their size, shape, colour, texture, etc. From a phenomenological perspective, these properties are internally related. So, for example, the yellow colour of a stone and its surface texture make that stone what it is and cannot be clearly distinguished from each other. Rather than regarding properties such as the colour of a thing, or the texture of a thing, as being abstracted characters, we could rather say that things have their own properties.¹⁵¹

In his work on menhirs in Brittany, Tilley insists on the inseparability of object (the stones) and subject (the poet, scientist, tourist). We do not just act on things, he argues, but we are acted on by them. Things possess a kind of agency insofar as they affect us. Things, he tells us, look back.

...painting is not just an act of pure vision; it establishes bodily contact between the painter, who paints with his or her body, and the painted. Painting is a bodily process linking the two. The painter sees the tree and trees see the painter, not because the trees have

¹⁵¹ Tilley C. (2004) *The Materiality of Stone : Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, Oxford: Berg. P.12.

eyes, but because the trees affect, move the painter, become part of the painting that would be impossible without their presence. In this sense the trees have agency and are not merely passive objects.¹⁵²

More or less the same exact point is made by McKay in one of his essays.

And when a lake or a pine marten looks back, when we are – however momentarily – *vis à vis*, the pause is always electric. Are we not right to sense, in such meetings, that envisaging flows both ways?¹⁵³

The world does not present itself to the nature poet or the phenomenologist as either an external object to be counted and measured nor as a blank slate upon which people (or more usually “society”) inscribe whatever meaning they want. The world and the people in the world are brought into being simultaneously through interaction. Tilley looks closely at his stone in Brittany.

The stones also had a significant and less obvious experiential dimension: time. Physical processes of weathering have gradually altered the form and character of these stones from the moment of their erection until the present day, accentuating grooves and

¹⁵² Ibid. P.18.

¹⁵³ Ibid. P.101.

depressions and bringing forth irregularities within them. Some have been subjected to lightning strikes, altering their physical form, and lichen growth and moss has changed the surface colour and texture. ¹⁵⁴

Once again we return to McKay's poem which begins and ends with the theme of time and the need to spend time with a rock we are experiencing closely.

The theme of the relation of words to the natural world goes hand in hand with the theme of the way in which humans transform nature into culture. A central metaphor throughout the book, and the subject of the closing diptych, is the contrast between rock (as raw nature) and stone (as culture). The menhirs in 'Gneiss' are clearly 'stone' but were once 'rock'. The theme of words and rocks is repeated in a different way in 'Utter'.

UTTER

Utmost, remote. To be there
when pain finds words. That place
past place where history goes mute and myth
withers. Where the only signs
are the stray marks made by tools

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. P.36.

on the margin of the task:
the utter left by the brute
weight of the piano. By the locomotive
grinding and polishing its tracks.
By my father's wheelchair
over and over scraping the frame
of the bathroom door. The utter
of our neolithic selves
knapping the rock, flaking
flint from chert, generation after
generation the dreadful craft by which
we etch a living. Work plus knack
plus luck. To slip that edge
between the ribs of grazing ungulates
the size of minivans. To reach into the rock and drag forth
Inco. To be there when pain finds
words and tastes them acrid and metallic
on its raw tongue. Uttered.¹⁵⁵

“Utter” is polysemous. Most obviously it refers to the act of speaking and in this sense refers to the way we represent things with spoken voice. But, McKay tells us in the ‘Notes’ at the end of the book, it can also be used in a more specialized way as a noun. In this sense it refers to “the irregular marks left on a surface by the vibration or too great pressure of

¹⁵⁵ McKay D. (2006) *Strike/Slip*, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart. P.34.

a tool". As we have seen, Strike/Slip is shot through with this kind of switching (sometimes in the same word) between the taken-for-granted and the specialized use of, often scientific, language. In the poem 'Utter', for instance, we encounter the words 'neolithic', 'chert' and 'ungulates' as well as the doubled work being done by 'utter' itself. McKay clearly loves etymology. Many of his poems circle around words which are listed or stated in one word sentences. The poem 'Apostrophe' starts:

Protero, palaeo, meso, ceno:
I had, I thought
a thing to say as I approached
the columns of angular basalt.

McKay enacts an illusion of stumbling for words throughout the collection in a way that explores etymology and reflects his interest in the reiterative failure of poetic/scientific language. He thought he had a thing to say and ends up stumbling.

'Specific Gravities: 76 (Marble)' starts:

To whom we turn to be
momentous, to be
monumental, to be

meant.¹⁵⁶

Here the clear focus on the 'm' words at the beginning of the poem (reflecting the 'm' in marble) play with time. Momentous is derived from moment and refers to an ability to transcend a moment in time and become important beyond that moment. Monumental, meanwhile, indicates both significant size and an ability to both memorialize the past and extend into the future (as in a monument). This entanglement of stone and time and significance is carried forward into the poem

As I browse

Among the statues it appears
that marble is the way eternity
confers itself on breasts¹⁵⁷

And the two poems that open the book reflect on the different ways in which kinds of stoniness (or is it rockiness?) have entered our language and become fossilized in words that no longer remind us of their origins – 'Astonished' and 'Petrified'.

ASTONISHED –

astounded, astonied, astunned, stopped short

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. P.28.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

and turned toward stone, the moment
filling with slow
stratified time.

It is not at all clear that words such as astounded or stunned are related to the old English word 'stone' but McKay acts as though they are. He is playing with stone and the idea of being so shocked, astonished, that we lose the capacity to act – we are turned to stone. Here there is a sense of the observer on the poem seeking the word that works best. It raises the possibility of uncertainty – of grasping for words – of words failing. This seeking for words to name the connection to the world that is the heart of phenomenology is a recurring theme in the book.

But let's return to 'Utter'.

Utmost, remote. To be there
when pain finds words. That place
past place where history goes mute and myth
withers.¹⁵⁸

These opening lines start, characteristically, with a short list. This time, two words playing off one another in sound (the 'o' sound as well as the 'm' and 't') and meaning. 'To be there/when pain finds words' takes us to the repeated theme of words and their connection or lack of it to rocks.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. P.33.

The line break 'there/when' adds precision to the geographical specificity of 'there' and the temporal locatedness of 'when'. Space and time divided and joined by a line break. And again - 'That place/past place where history goes mute and myth/withers'. The line break takes us to 'That place' which is 'past place'. And that place (again the 'that' makes this very specific) is a place where words are not present, or inadequate to the task. Human words - 'history' and 'myth' wither. This is, perhaps, pre-history. That possibility is continued in the next lines:

Where the only signs
are the stray marks made by tools
on the margin of the task:¹⁵⁹

These lines give a sense of doing being more primal than saying (let alone writing). Words as signs are replaced by the 'stray marks made by tools', left accidentally. But then the voyage into a primal past is broken:

the utter left by the brute
weight of the piano. By the locomotive
grinding and polishing its tracks.
By my father's wheelchair
over and over scraping the frame
of the bathroom floor.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Here we are returned to a human world. No longer are we imagining a pre-historical past but we are right here in a world of pianos and locomotives and wheelchairs. The way we leave marks on the world links a deep past to a domestic present. We wear ourselves into the world, not intentionally but as a by-product of purposeful life. It is not just in the past that words struggled to explain, McKay appears to be saying, the same is true of right here and right now. The next lines take us back again to the assumed pre-history of the beginning.

The utter
of our neolithic selves
knapping the rock, flaking
flint from chert, generation after
generation the dreadful craft by which
we etch a living.¹⁶¹

McKay gets, metaphorically, to the heart of human being-in-the-world. This passage works with sound and rhythm. “knapping the rock, flaking/flint from chert’ piles up consonants and quick syllables in a staccato fashion suggesting the repetition of small, quick actions. These actions, on the surface the way Neolithic people used stone tools to make more stone tools, stands for human action on the world in general - action which is necessary in order to make a world out of the world. This is

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

building, the central part of the Heideggerian process of dwelling. It is also the action of making a living. Of economics. We live in these repetitions in a habit-world and in doing so leave marks – the ‘utter’. This ‘utter’ - these marks - are the signs of the limitations of the other ‘utter’ – the use of words.

Back to the poem.

Work plus knack
plus luck. To slip that edge
between the ribs of grazing ungulates
the size of minivans. To reach into the rock and drag forth
Inco.¹⁶²

The soundscape continues with the insistent “k” sounds in a monosyllabic sentence. The product of all this work appears to be some kind of stone blade, the kind that can be used to skillfully kill an ungulate the size of a minivan. And then to ‘reach into the rock’ (something many of the poems here appear to be attempting) and drag forth ‘Inco’. Inco, it turns out, is a mining company involved in nickel mining. Another form of work – another cause of ‘utter’ – the unintended but necessary marking of the land that results from etching a living (the word ‘etch’ used in the previous passage also takes us back to marks made in rocks). This switch (across a line break) from a phenomenological moment of reaching into

¹⁶² Ibid.

rock to 'Inco' is a characteristic device of McKay switching us out of pure nature into the modern world of capital and commercial culture. A similar effect comes from the earlier connection (though size) made between a pre-historic mammal and a minivan. This stretch across time, from a simple stone to a nickel mining company charts out the long history of people messing with the wild. The use of a stone tool to kill an animal foreshadows industrialization and thus signifies a fall from grace.

Switches in diction and attitude (such as the sudden shift from the phenomenology of rock to the discovery of Inco) do a lot of the work in McKay's poetry. At first reading the poems seem earnest and sincere attempts at a direct connection to the rocks and birds that inhabit his poetic world. The presence of humans seems to be an afterthought. But the language constantly skips between a lyrical poetics, the language of science, sardonic flashes of humour and deflating references to popular culture. It is as though McKay catches himself taking things too seriously and decides to bring things down a notch. The different levels of formality and juxtaposed discursive worlds help to reveal the continual failure of words. In an essay called 'Seven Good Reasons to Assassinate Don McKay. By a Secret Admirer", Dennis Lee makes this point well.

McKay keeps varying the level of diction (slangy, lyrical, formal, etc.), and drawing on disparate playbooks of discourse (field guides, sportscasts, soap operas, etc.). The resulting volatility in the tone has the same effect on the page that our changes of facial expression

do when we're speaking out loud – where our body language can reinforce, contradict, or embroider the literal meaning of the words.¹⁶³

Conclusion

In these poems McKay is practicing what he has referred to as “poetic attention” – a particular form of knowing.

Nature poetry's paradoxical situation is, I think, roughly analogous to home-making. Being language, it cannot avoid the primordial grasp, but this occurs simultaneously with the extended palm, the openness in knowing that I've been calling poetic attention. And that experience suggests strongly that, although it cannot be spoken, radical otherness exists. In fact, nature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropomorphism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully. It performs the translation which is at the heart of being human, the simultaneous grasp and gift of home-making. And the persistence of poetic attention during the act of composition is akin to the translator's attention to the original, all the while she performs upon it a delicate and dangerous transformation.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Lee D. (2010) Seven Good Reasons to Assassinate Don McKay. By a Secret Admirer. In: McKay D (ed) *Foglio a Foglia. Leaf to Leaf*. Ravenna, Italy: Longo Editore Ravenna, 8-14. P.8.

¹⁶⁴ McKay D. (2001) *Vis à Vis : Fieldnotes on Poetry & Wilderness*, Wolfville, NS: Gaspereau Press. PP.29-30.

Here McKay reflects on what he sees as the heart of ‘nature poetry’ – the act of acknowledging the radical otherness, or the *wild*, in the world. The poet is implicated in the process of dwelling by his or her transformation of worlds into words which fail. Writing is home-making. McKay wants to convince us cynical and skeptical post-structuralists that nature and the wild still matter – that “it is as dangerous to act as though we were not part of nature as it is to act as though we were not part of culture; and the intellectual and political distortions produced by these contrary ideologies are greatly to be feared” (McKay, 2001: 30-31). He does this through a phenomenological attention to the natural world and particularly, in *Strike/Slip*, to rock. He twists language for all it’s worth to make evident the faulty seam that connects and separates us to and from the world.

Chapter Five

Jorie Graham and the Poetics of Friction.

(PLACE, 2012)

In an early poem, the first poem in her *Selected Poems* collection, *The Dream of the Unified Field*, Jorie Graham muses on the typically ambitious theme of THE WAY THINGS WORK.

I believe
forever in the hooks.
The way things work
is that eventually
something catches.¹⁶⁵

In this chapter I focus on this act of ‘catching’ and its role in Graham’s poetics of dwelling and place. The focus of the chapter is Graham’s most recent collection, *PLACE*.¹⁶⁶ Graham’s poetry is, perhaps, less obviously about dwelling than the poetry of McKay or Burnside. There is less obvious rumination on landscapes and places in the ways we usually think about them. There is also a greater distance between attention to details in Graham’s poems and the handling of universals and abstractions – which Graham is brazenly happy to engage with – often in capital letters in the title. Indeed, the title of Graham’s 2012 collection –

¹⁶⁵ Graham J. (1995) *The Dream of the Unified Field : Selected Poems, 1974-1994*, Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press. P.3.

¹⁶⁶ Graham J. (2012) *Place*, Manchester: Carcanet.

PLACE – should at least make us pause and wonder why she chose such a title – and not just ‘Place’, but PLACE. ‘Places’ are particular segments of the earth surface – often named – which have accrued meaning (they have a sense of place) and have been formed through repeated actions. Places are particular, once and once only. If they become alike they (allegedly) become ‘placeless’.¹⁶⁷ So what happens when the word PLACE appears on the front of a book of poetry. The particular things that are ‘places’ suddenly become a concept – PLACE – a word which does not denote Boston or Ealing or the Lake District but the *idea* of place – the bundle of meanings that *connects* Boston, Ealing and the Lake District rather than differentiating them. A review of PLACE in the *New York Review* similarly lingered on the bold one-word title, linking it to other titles Graham has used such as *Swarm* and *Erosion*. Strangely, however, the reviewer contrasts these words with PLACE suggesting that “Graham has often used one-word titles (...) but never a single word so apparently deficient in philosophical or sensory content. It is a word waiting to be filled in, a blank, a placeholder: it clears the ground upon which the poems themselves will build.”¹⁶⁸ The idea that ‘place’ is a word devoid of philosophical and sensory content seems misplaced (if it isn’t misplaced then this thesis is barking up the wrong tree). At the very heart of ‘place’ is a surfeit of sensory experience. As sensory experience decreases, the further we are from place. It is also philosophically rich, as the work of

¹⁶⁷ Relph E. (1976) *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion, Augé M. (1995) *Non-Places : Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London ; New York: Verso.

¹⁶⁸ Chiasson D. (2012) The Actual Hawk, the Real Tree. *New York Review*. New York, 64-65. P.64.

any number of philosophers since Heidegger suggests.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, a charitable reading of this statement points towards the mismatch between collections with the names of places (the reviewer suggests William Carlos Williams' 'Paterson' for instance) and a collection with the title PLACE. A similar mismatch is suggested by comparing the possibilities of a collection with the name *Dart* with a collection called RIVER. There is something between the actuality of real, experienced, places and the idea of PLACE and this is the space that Graham's collection inhabits. The question is why? My suggestion here is that one way into answering this question is by returning to THE WAY THINGS WORK and focusing on this final few lines – where she asserts the importance of hooks, and the possibility of things catching.

The distance between places and PLACE is reminded to us in a number of ways throughout the book. There are certainly places in the poems, and some of the titles indicate quite conventional senses of places – CAGNES SUR MER 1950, MESSAGE FROM ARMAGH CATHEDRAL, or even EARTH. On other occasions a place is given in parentheses under the title: 'SUNDOWN - (St. Laurent Sur Mer, June 5, 2009)', 'LAPSE - (Summer Solstice, 1983, Iowa City)' or 'WAKING – (Ecrammeville, 6 A.M.)'. In these latter poems the titles with subtitles enact immediately the space between the particular and the abstract. The titles are generic single

¹⁶⁹ Casey ES. (1998) *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, Malpas JE. (1999) *Place and Experience : A Philosophical Topography*, Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, Entrikin JN. (1991) *The Betweenness of Place : Towards a Geography of Modernity*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.

words (SUNDOWN, LAPSE, WAKING) while the subtitles are as specific as possible – a place and time. While ‘waking’ or ‘sundown’ refer to repeated and unlocated events that we can all access as part of our lived experience, ‘Ecrammeville. 6 A.M’ is extraordinarily unlikely to be part of any of the readers’ experiences and clearly denotes a specific moment in space and time that was once and once only. On the whole, however, these are not primarily poems about places. What they most definitely are, are poems about PLACE – place as a name for the ways in which we become attached to the earth.¹⁷⁰

In the poem, THE SURE PLACE we find the narrator pruning and training the wisteria that grows outside her house. The poem is left-aligned on the page, unlike the majority of the poems in the book that have long left-aligned lines and shorter lines hanging down from them, starting at the centre of the page like this, the beginning of EARTH:

Into the clearing shimmering which is my owned

lawn between

two patches of

woods near

dawn clock running as usual the human in me

watching as usual

for

¹⁷⁰ See Tuan Y-F. (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Casey ES. (1998) *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

everything to separate from everything as light
comes back¹⁷¹

But THE SURE PLACE does not take this form, which marks it, and several other key poems in the collection as being special in some way. THE SURE PLACE is left aligned, has plenty of dashes and commas, one colon and one full stop (at the end). It is, in a conventional sense, one sentence. The lines form a ragged edge down the right hand side of the poem. As with all the poems in the book there are no spaces separating the poem vertically – that is to say, there are no stanzas. The poem begins:

Outside the window this morning, I reach for it, the newest
extension, here at second story, of the wisteria vine –
the tenth summer's growth,
the August 13th portion of,
the rootball planted when still
the mother of a new child,¹⁷²

Here, Graham uses a range of dimensions in time and space. The focus of the poem is established immediately. Graham (and she seems to leave little doubt that the “I” that populates these poems quite promiscuously is, indeed, herself) is working with her wisteria. Immediately, however, we are taken out from this very specific activity into other dimensions. First of all we get temporality. We have a date, we have ten summers, we

¹⁷¹ Graham J. (2012) *Place*, Manchester: Carcanet. P.5.

¹⁷² Ibid. P.45.

have a once-new mother. We end up a long way from this moment – ten year previously. And then back to the wisteria.

one almost tired-looking very silent out-arriving
tendrils – what kind of energy is this in my hands,
this tress of glucose and watery scribbling – something which cannot
reach
conclusion, my open palm just under it,¹⁷³

The poem is dotted with the very specific – here the ‘silent out-arriving/tendrils’ and later in the poem

and I hold it tight to the stone
as I bring the string around it
not to crush the sucrose and glucose in it but still
to hold it back that the as yet unformed blossoms
that would channel up it might channel up it¹⁷⁴

As well as moving out into distant time from this tendril (this sure place?), Graham frequently zooms in to the cellular level, writing of glucose, sucrose. This travel into the cellular enacts a kind of fantastic voyage into plant life. In this voyage we enter scientific diction which, despite its microscopic scale, gestures outwards to processes that exceed

¹⁷³ Ibid. P.45.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. P.46.

the specific moment that is captured by the poem. This giddy down-scaling paradoxically works to broaden the place and time:

the outermost question being asked me by the world today –
it is weak it is exactly the right weakness –
we have other plans for your life says the world –
wind coming from below with the summary tick in it,
where it rounds and tucks-up from fullness where it allows one to
hear
the rattling in the millions of now-drying seedpods
hanging in the trees off the walls under the hedges,
every leaf has other plans for you say the minutes also the seconds
also the tiniest
fractions of whatever atoms make this hot breezeless day,
in which what regards the soul is what it has given back
(when the sky is torn)(when the seas are poured forth)
the wisteria in my hand¹⁷⁵

Here, Graham starts with the “outermost question” being asked by “the world”. This is no small question. Both the question itself, located as far from the inside as possible, and the questioner, none other than the whole world, are about as epic in scale as possible. And yet the question is “weak” – not strong, not with a strength to match its scale. But the weakness is “exactly” right.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. P.45.

The wisteria at the centre of THE SURE PLACE provides just one example of the flowers of one kind and another that appear frequently in PLACE.

Consider this passage in TORN SCORN for instance:

I think this is all somewhere inside myself, the incessant burning of my birth

all shine

lessening as also all low-flame

heat of

love: and places loved, space time and people heightening, burning, then nothing:

always less

incipience as visible

time shows itself –the

stamens the groves the winds their verdicts the walls and other walls behind,

also the

petal right now off that red

amaryllis, then stillness, then one awaiting the next thing of each thing, a needle

trembling in a

hand, dust

settling on the apple tree,¹⁷⁶

Or in ALTHOUGH where the narrator (poet) struggles with the act of writing while contemplating a vase of cut flowers.

Nobody there. A vase of cut flowers with which the real is (before us on this page)

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. P.42.

permeated-is it a page-look hard-(I try)-this
bouquet
in its
vase-tiger dahlias (red and white), orange freesia (three stalks) (floating
out), one
large blue-mauve hydrangea-head, still
wet¹⁷⁷

The references to flowers and other plants, and particularly the parts of plants such as stamen, remind us of the opening lines of Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence' with its juxtapositions of scale: "To see a world in a grain of sand/ And a heaven in a wild flower/ Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/ And eternity in an hour". This link between the microscopically detailed and 'eternity' is, for the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, right at the heart of a spatial poetics.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard considers a description made by a botanist of a flower. He describes how the description of a flower, seen through a magnifying glass starts objectively (relatively speaking) but ends up in a flight of fancy in which "the four stamen stand erect and on excellent terms with one another" while "the little pistil remains respectfully at their feet, but since it is very small, in order to speak to it, they, in turn, must bend their knees." The botanist, in Bachelard's eyes, uses the flower to paint a picture of married life in the home. The account

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. P.47.

of the botanist is no longer an account of reality. It has been made to stand for something. It is the miniature scale of the flower, Bachelard believes, that allows the images to grow and escape – expand into the world. “Large images from small...thanks to the liberation from all obligations of dimensions, a liberation that is a special characteristic of the activity of the imagination.”¹⁷⁸

Thus the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be a sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness.

Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness.¹⁷⁹

And this, of course, is also a conundrum at the heart of science. The ‘unified field’ in the title of Graham’s selected poems refers to possibly the greatest ambition at the heart of theoretical physics – the desire to combine Einstein’s general theory of relativity (a theory that works at a massive scale – the universe) with quantum theory (a theory that works at a very small scale – inside the atom). Such a theory is also known as a ‘theory of everything’ and would unify explanations of what happens at the scale of the universe with what happens inside an individual atom. While theories at either scale have proven somewhat convincing they do not include each other. This tension between relativity and quantum

¹⁷⁸ Bachelard G. (1994) *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press. PP.154-155.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. P.155.

mechanics is (metaphorically) at the heart of Graham's endeavours and (less explicitly and insistently) at the heart of poetic practice itself.

Returning to THE SURE PLACE, the poem ends with a return to the focused and particular – the moment and place that is being inhabited by the narrator, by Graham.

driving a nail in now, and then a length of string,
around which to wrap this new growth, for it to cling to and surpass
so that next week when I look again it will have woven round its few
more times
and grown hairy in its clinging and gotten to a new length
which we will be called upon to tie back, new knot, new extension,
to the next-on nail yet further up
on what remains on what's left of this wall.

As with the start of the poem, this extract links a very fine, 'miniature' observation of nails and knots with a reflection on time. The relatively small space over which wisteria grows in a week links space and time in a way that is insistent and cyclical (seasonal). The sure place is that particular moment, being there with that particular wisteria – a still point in an unraveling of time and space.

THE SURE PLACE exemplifies much of what is happening in the collection as a whole (though its shape and form makes it stand out). The title,

perhaps, refers to the tiniest level of certainty in time and space – the fact, in this case, that there is some wisteria that needs training – the wisteria with its glucose and sucrose and atoms that is in the narrator’s hands and that has been different and will again be different. It is a fulcrum around which time and space are endlessly and vertiginously changing (and remain, unlike the wisteria, ungraspable). The general lack of punctuation (the poem is one long sentence) works against the line breaks that force a confused sense of time. This effect is heightened in other poems where Graham uses her staggered long-line/short-line form which bears no obvious relation to sentence structures. The theme of time is also central to the poem and collection. Reading the poems forces an experience of time stretching and accelerating – like slow-motion combined with tracking shots and close ups in a movie. It plays giddily with spatial scale and temporal structure in an intricate exercise of discombobulation. This makes the possible existence of a certain ‘sure place’ stand out all the more. It seems highly likely that this focus on the point which is certain and where time and space come into focus is informed by TS Eliot’s ‘still point’ in ‘Burnt Norton’:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.

And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.¹⁸⁰

Graham's collection matches Eliot's in its use of specific places as tethers for abstract ideas. Each of Eliot's quartets is given a place name as a starting point for a sustained philosophical investigation. In 'Burnt Norton' Eliot uses a rose garden as an objective location for a poetic philosophy of time. Graham uses the point where wisteria is trained to a wall.

The wisteria is not the only 'sure place' in PLACE. A very precise form of positioning occurs in many of the poems. In THE SURE PLACE we are on top of a ladder as the universe warps and folds around us. In CAGNES SUR MERE 1950 we are positioned in one place which, the poet tells, is a unique point in time and space.

I am the only one who ever lived who remembers
my mother's voice in the particular shadow
cast by the sky-filled Roman archway
which darkens the stones on the down-sloping street
up which she has now come again suddenly.

Here Graham grapples with specificity. This moment is a place. The spatial context could hardly be more specified. Even the shadow is

¹⁸⁰ Eliot TS. (2001) *Four Quartets*, London,: Faber & Faber. P.15.

precise. The rest of the poem grapples with much less precise memories
(or illusions of memories) trying to recover that sense of a time and place.
As with the glucose of the wisteria, or the stamen in the cut flowers,
Graham bores down to the internal.

I

pick up the infant and place it back again
to where I am a small reservoir of blood, twelve pounds of bone and
sinew and other matters-already condemned to this one soul –
which we are told weighs less than a feather, or as much
as four ounces when grown – as if I could travel, I back up
those arteries, up the precious liquid, across the field of methods, agonies,
astonishments –¹⁸¹

The poem draws out lines from this one place which is set up as a fulcrum
around which time is organized –

where one story does not yet become another,
and words, which have not yet come to me, will not try to tell
where each thing emerges, where it is heading,

and later

It was a hilltop town in the south in the summer.
It was before I knew about knowing.
My mind ran everywhere and was completely still at the center.

¹⁸¹ Graham J. (2012) *Place*, Manchester: Carcanet. P.6.

And that did not feel uncomfortable.

In this 'still point' (or sure place) the sentences momentarily align themselves with poetic lines – an unusual moment in this collection. The full stop at the end of the third line appears particularly unnecessary as it is followed (after the line break) by “And”. It is as if this is something definite where everything else is scrambled. This is underlined by the gathering pace of the last passage and the final sentence of the poem:

I think that was the moment of my being given a name,
where I first heard the voices carrying the prices
as her face broke and its smile appeared bending down towards me
saying *there you are, there you are*.¹⁸²

“There you are” – where? Cagnes sur Mer, 1950 – in the shadow of an archway by a down-sloping street – at the point before words and knowing. At the still point.

These precisely imagined positionings in space are matched, in several poems, by an insistent repetition of definite articles and precise adjectives.¹⁸³ In EARTH for instance (precision underlined by me):

as you

¹⁸² Ibid. P.8.

¹⁸³ I am indebted to Jennifer Kurdyla’s review of PLACE in *the [tk] Review* for pointing this out. Kurdyla JN. (2012) *Call and Response: Jorie Graham's Place*. Available at: <http://www.thetkreview.com/2012/04/13/call-and-response-jorie-grahams-p-l-a-c-e/>.

make your swerve,
dragging the increasingly
yellow arc across the room here
on this hill and
I shall say now
because of human imagination:
here on this floor this
passage is
your wing, is
an infinitesimal
strand of a feather in
your wing,¹⁸⁴

The use of little words like ‘is’, ‘in’ and ‘it’ are unusually placed at line breaks – suggesting their importance as signifiers of a very precise kind of presence. As Jennifer Kurdyla puts it: “Through both its conceptual and formal manifestations, then, place literally captures an occasion from start to finish.”¹⁸⁵

The specificity of place is also marked by the recollection of sounds in PLACE. In WAKING (Ecrammeville, 6 A.M.) the narrator is woken by bells.

The bells again. You open up your eyes

¹⁸⁴ Graham J. (2012) *Place*, Manchester: Carcanet. P.66.

¹⁸⁵ Kurdyla JN. (2012) *Call and Response: Jorie Graham's Place*. Available at: <http://www.thetkreview.com/2012/04/13/call-and-response-jorie-grahams-p-l-a-c-e/>.

again. A gap. To be a person-
human and then a woman.

To be one who has had
enough.

....

the bells
ring as they do, one long note, one
short, a man with a tall hood limping and

limping and yet always staying
in place I

think

listening. It does not go forward or up or down this

call to

prayer, a creature stuck in a doorway

made to cough up

one truth

without alteration. It will not

confess to

anything. The thing the bell is

saying stays for its millennia

the same.¹⁸⁶

Sounds provide a precise way of developing a sense of place at a particular moment in time. The way a sound is heard is particular – it seems like something beyond representation – something embodied. But at the same time sounds that are like each other can, through their

¹⁸⁶ Graham J. (2012) *Place*, Manchester: Carcanet. PP.59-60.

repetition, create place in a different way. Yi-Fu Tuan considers the relationship between sound and place.

The organization of human space is uniquely dependent on sight. Other senses expand and enrich visual space. Thus sound enlarges one's spatial awareness to include areas behind the head that cannot be seen. More important, sound dramatizes spatial experience. Soundless space feels calm and lifeless despite the visible flow of activity in it, as in watching events through binoculars or on the television screen with the sound turned off, or being in a city muffled in a fresh blanket of snow.¹⁸⁷

Anthropologists have explored the relationship between space, place and sound through varieties of sensory ethnography.¹⁸⁸ Steven Feld, for instance, has spent his life experimenting with the recording of sounds in a variety of settings. He calls this practice 'acoustemology' (acoustic epistemology) and uses it to focus on the role of sound in the process of knowing the world. Place is central to this practice. "The experience of place" he argues, "can always be grounded in an acoustic dimension."¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Tuan Y-F. (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁸⁸ Pink S. (2009) *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, London: SAGE.

¹⁸⁹ Feld S. (1996) Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea. In: Basso K and Feld S (eds) *Senses of Place*. Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 91-136.

Feld has recorded the sounds of bells around the world in order to illustrate the relations between sound and place. The sounds of bells, like birdsong, have particular geographies.

I'm fascinated by relationships of bells and music, for example, a church bell with the same resonant decay time as one of the oldest organs in Finland. Or bells and space, for example, when walking with a shepherd in Italy and hearing, a kilometer away, the funeral bells from the church overlapping the bells of his 50 sheep. These are historically layered relationships in sound, like the way belled flocks move through the countryside, making place audible (...). Or the way time bells and chimes make communities audible. And the particularity of interactions of these kinds of bell sounds with cars and motorbikes, with televisions and radios, and all the sounds of the modern world.¹⁹⁰

Another way in which sound is used by Graham is through repeated reference to birdsong. THE BIRD ON MY RAILING starts:

From

the still wet iron of

my fire

escape's top

railing a truth is making this instant on our clock

¹⁹⁰ Feld S and Brenneis D. (2004) Doing Anthropology in Sound. *American Ethnologist* 31: 461-474. P.469.

open with a taut
unchirping un-
breaking note – a perfectly
released vowel traveling

the high branches across the way¹⁹¹

Here birdsong is heard in the first moments of waking. Waking is another theme repeated through the collection – often in different locations.

Sound and waking and place merge into an experiential whole. Steven Feld reflects on the sound/waking moment arguing that the act of listening while waking is to experience the local.

Everyone experiences waking. But what difference does it make to wake in different places, singly, or repeatedly, and to wake to different sounds? Through years of waking in multiple locales, I am deeply drawn to sonic shifts marking states of sleep, dream, and partial or full consciousness. These provide an unending mix of daily lessons in acoustemology, (acoustic epistemology), in knowing the world sensuously through immersions in local listening.¹⁹²

In his seminal book, *The Soundscape*, Schafer outlines a procedure for examining what he calls “the tuning of the world”. Mirroring the work of

¹⁹¹ Graham J. (2012) *Place*, Manchester: Carcanet. P.16.

¹⁹² See <http://ethnographicterminalia.org/2012-artists/steve-feld>

linguists and others on 'figure' and 'ground'.¹⁹³ Places, he argues, have distinctive background soundscapes which he refers to as 'keynote sounds'.

Even though keynote sounds may not always be heard consciously, the fact that they are ubiquitously there suggests the possibility of a deep and pervasive influence on our behavior and moods. The keynote sounds of a given place are important because they help to outline the character of men living among them.

The keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals. Many of these sounds may possess archetypal significance; that is, they may have imprinted themselves so deeply on the people hearing them that life without them would be sensed as a distinct impoverishment.¹⁹⁴

Keynote sounds provide the background hum of places. Mostly, they are unnoticed and taken-for-granted. Signal sounds, on the other hand are the sonic events we do notice that are given sonic form by the keynote sounds. Both, as Feld has argued, have contributed to an ecology of sound that works to define experiences of place.

¹⁹³ See, for instance, Stockwell P. (2002) *Cognitive Poetics : An Introduction*, London: Routledge.

¹⁹⁴ Schafer RM. (1993) *The Soundscape : Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Rochester, VT: Destiny Books PP.9-10.

Sound is related to place in a very particular way that has a different spatiality to the more dominant visual perception of place. The visual depends on distance. We perceive ourselves as separate from what it is we see. And what we see has to be more or less in front of us. Sound centres us in place. We are in it rather than away from from it. It surrounds us even when we have some sense of a direction it may be coming from. We can chose not to see a scene (by closing our eyes or looking elsewhere) but it is much more difficult to escape a sound. In this sense, geographer Paul Rodaway has argued, sound centres us in space. In addition, sound is always active – sounds emerge from action. Without action there is no sound. Sound indicates a lively presence in place – an immersion in the world.

Both sounds received and sounds made literally take place or have location, and occupy or project over space *and* each sound has a specific duration, so occupies time as well. Auditory geography is therefore time-space geography, a dynamic geography of events rather than images, or activity rather than scene.¹⁹⁵

THE BIRD ON MY RAILING is the last poem of Part 1 (there are four parts to PLACE). It is a sustained reflection on the bird and its song. But birdsong peppers the collection. The first poem of Part 2, for instance, is END (November 21, 2010). It begins:

¹⁹⁵ Rodaway P. (1994) *Sensuous Geographies : Body, Sense, and Place*, London: Routledge. P.90.

End of autumn. Deep fog. There are chains in it, and sounds of
hinges. No that was
birds. A bird and
gate.

Again, Part IV starts with bird song in THE BIRD THAT BEGINS IT:

In the world-famous night which is already flinging away bits of dark but not
quite yet
there opens
a sound like a
rattle, then a slicing in which even the
blade is
audible, and then again, even though trailing the night melt, suddenly, again,
the
rattle. In the
night of the return of day, of next-on time, of
shape name field
with history flapping
all over it
invisible flags, or winds, or wings¹⁹⁶

In CAGNES SUR MER 1950 the exactness of the archway and the shadow
is layered with a recollection of sounds of calls from a market place.

¹⁹⁶ Graham J. (2012) *Place*, Manchester: Carcanet. P.53.

Halfway through the poem “A bird sang, it added itself to the shadow/under the archway”. The already exact visual description of place is made more precise by the sudden addition of a singing bird.

Returning to THE BIRD ON MY RAILING, the poem ends with a reflection on the transitory insubstantiality of the sound of the bird – once again performing a dance between the very specific moment (in this case, the moment of hearing a bird) and the continuing passage of time.

and how
when it opens its
yellow beak in the glint-sun to
let out song
into the cold, it
lets out the note on a plume of
steam,
lets out the
visible heat of its
inwardness
carrying a note – a note in
a mist – a note-
breath, breath-
note – oh
cold spring – the white
plume the size of a
bird rises up with its own

tail,
feathering-out in
the directions,
filled out by the next and next-on
note, until the whole
shape of the
song is wisped-
up and
shuts,
the singing
shuts, the form
complete, the breath-bird
free to
rise away into the young day and
not be ⁻¹⁹⁷

Birdsong, like the sound of bells, acts as something very specific that signifies place – right there and right then – but simultaneously points towards the transitory moment that makes (however microscopically) a difference to a place. The birdsong is a totally present soundscape that, a moment later can “not be”.

Conclusion

I started this chapter by suggesting that the notion of ‘catching’ lies at the heart of an interpretation of PLACE. In conclusion I would like to return

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 19.

to this. In PLACE, Graham practices a poetics of friction. The small and specific moments and places act as hooks to catch the passing flow of the universal and abstract. We have seen how Graham uses place names, words (such as ‘this’, ‘that’ and ‘it’) which insist on particularity, and the fleeting presence of sounds to create a ‘still point’ or ‘sure place’ to anchor explorations of time and space as abstractions. The notion of ‘friction’ provides a shorthand for accounting for the way the particular is linked to the universal – the concrete to the abstract.

An unlikely source for this notion of a poetics of friction is the anthropologist, Anna Tsing. Tsing uses the idea of friction to explore what happens when global capitalism touches down in the rainforests of Indonesia. Tsing is interested in how supposed *universals*, such as forms of truth, science or capital, travel in the real world. Universals, she argues, are spread through connections and are, by definition, global. In order to be global and universal they need to spread out in order to fulfill their existence *as* universal. Through her exploration of the specific entanglements of universals in the logging industry of Indonesia she accounts for what happens when the flow of the universal encounters place and particularity. Universals, she argues only materialize *in the particular*. It is when this translation occurs that friction happens – “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference”.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Tsing AL. (2005) *Friction : An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. P.4.

...a study of global connections shows the grip of encounter: friction. A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power.¹⁹⁹

Tsing shows how friction is double-edged. On the one hand we can think of friction as the “blockages” that get in the way of things moving. In this case friction is a force that slows things down or stops them. On the other hand friction is necessary for things to move. If you try and run on ice in shoes with smooth soles you will simply fall over. If, however, you use rubber soles and walk on tarmac it is friction that creates the possibility of movement. In other words, friction both hinders and enables flow. In Tsing’s terms, the ‘universals’ that travel through global connections can only travel through their purchase on particular, and always different, situations. The dance of mobility and friction thus interferes with the dreams of unimpeded mobility. But everywhere it goes, this mobility from above encounters the friction of context and the particular that give them shape and efficacy.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. P.5.

Engaged universals travel across difference and are charged and changed by their travels. Through friction, universals become practically effective. Yet they can never fulfill their promises of universality. Even in transcending localities, they don't take over the world. They are limited by the practical necessity of mobilizing adherents. Engaged universals must convince us to pay attention to them. *All* universals are engaged when considered as practical projects accomplished in an heterogeneous world.²⁰⁰

Just as it would be impossible to walk without friction, so friction makes the actualization of mobile universals possible but only at the expense of their status *as* universal. Universals, which have to be mobile, can only experience *becoming* through the way in which they are made *particular* through friction and in *place*.

So much for global capitalism and the logging industry of Indonesia but what has this to do with Jorie Graham? My sense is that the poems in PLACE are focusing on this friction at a different scale. Tsing's sentences above can be more or less directly applied to Graham. Her poems focus on the points when 'engaged universals' are charged and changed –the moments when they touch down and get snagged on a wisteria bush – when they become “practical projects accomplished in an heterogeneous world”. It is at these moments of friction when universals get translated into particulars – when PLACE becomes places. And this notion of PLACE

²⁰⁰ Ibid. P.8.

plays a very significant ethical, political and poetic role in Graham's collection. Each poem has its moments when abstraction makes contact with the earth – with life as lived. These moments, these sure places, are glimmers of certainty in an uncertain world. Just as McKay productively failed over and over to get at the essence of rocks, so Graham repeatedly indicates her failure to convey the singularity of place-bound experience through the use of parentheses. Consider the account of the vase of flowers on her desk:

Nobody there. A vase of cut flowers with which the real is (before us on this page)

permeated-is it a page-look hard-(I try)-this bouquet
in its
vase-tiger dahlias (red and white), orange freesia (three stalks) (floating
out), one
large blue-mauve hydrangea-head, still
wet

Here Graham, in a knowing, post-modern gesture, makes visible her struggle to account for the world, and the flowers in particular. The words in parentheses rehearse her failure (she tries). Or consider her encounter with another flower in BIRD ON A RAILING:

look
this light
is moving

across that flower on
my sill
at this exact
speed – right now – right here – now it is gone – yet go back up
five lines it is
still there I can't
go back, it's
gone,²⁰¹

Again and again Graham uses very particular moments and places to reflect on the passage of time. The act of writing itself becomes part of this process that is made visible in Graham's poetic practice. It is as if Graham wants to reverse the notion that poets should make their poems look effortless despite the very hard work that has gone into them. Graham appears to want to include the work of writing the world within the poems – to make us aware of the act of writing. Here, writing becomes part of the passage of time. Time, in *PLACE*, is not linear time with regular and equal segments repeating one after the other. Rather time is elastic, flexible and fragmented. It expands and contracts with the pulse of her innovative form. While the poems are often (like Eliot) about time, they are also enactments of time. The non-correspondence of poetic line to sentence structure, the long lines followed by short lines, the sentences that go on for whole poems – all make demands on the reader (especially when read aloud) that work like a heart with an arrhythmia – contracting and expanding time at will.

²⁰¹ Graham J. (2012) *Place*, Manchester: Carcanet. P.18.

At the centre of this dizzying temporal poetics are small moments of (relative) certainty – sure places and still points – that provide the hooks, the points of friction – which snag or slow down the rush of abstractions (like time and space) that exist at epic, universal scales. In this way Graham plays with scale in time and space simultaneously. And these moments, where abstractions make themselves present in the world, where “something catches”, are, in the end, all we have to hold on to and care for. This, I think, is Graham’s ethics of place.

Chapter Five

Conclusion.

This thesis combines an account of poetry as place with my own creative practice. This section links one to the other. The thesis thus far has introduced the idea of topopoetics – a poetics of place that focuses on the poem *as* place, as well as poems *about* place. The introduction outlined a number of ways in which spatial thinking can inform our reading of poems as kinds of places. I focused here on the relationship between words and blank space on the page, on the creative play between the stasis of shapes on the page and the movement and rhythm of sound and sense as the reader reads down the page and, finally, on the metaphorical relationship between inside and outside. I then sought to illustrate various aspects of poems as places by a close reading of poems from collections by four poets: *Geography III* by Elizabeth Bishop, *The Asylum Dance* by John Burnside, *Strike/Slip* by Don McKay and *PLACE* by Jorie Graham. I was led to this theme, and this way of looking at poems, by reflecting on the predispositions of my own poetic practice as well as central themes in my academic work as a geographer over the last few decades.

In the poems which follow I explore themes of place, journey and, perhaps most clearly, displacement. The first half of the poems were written early in the process and form part of my collection, *Soil*, published by Pinned in the

Margins in 2013. That book also includes a long sequence called “Soil” which I was unable to include in this thesis due to the length restrictions outlined in the thesis regulations. The second half of the poems that follow have been completed since *Soil* was published and form part of a collection in progress I call *erratic*.

Both the account of topopoetics that precedes this conclusion, and the poems that follow reflect my twin calling as a geographer and a poet – a geographer-poet. The aim here is to provide some content for the hyphen in geographer-poet – to reflect on my own topopoetic practice in the poems that follow.

There is a relatively small tradition of geographers becoming (published) poets. Perhaps the most successful was the Canadian geographer James Wreford-Watson, the author of the collection *Of Time and the Lover* that won him the Canadian Governor General’s Award for Poetry in 1951.²⁰² The collection, very much of its time, is full of geographical terminology such as in the poem *Nunatak*.

Not all the nunataks of time
nor tireless noons that tire the chart
of mortal shadows out, resist
the sheet erosion of the heart,

²⁰² Watson JW. (1950) *Of Time and the Lover*, Toronto,: McClland & Stewart.

shall match this moment, which so brief
as against mountains, still can prove
against the march of shade on shade
the timeless monument of love.²⁰³

Wreford-Watson, however, was not the only geographer to engage in poetic practice. Jay Appleton, a geographer from Hull, has been publishing poetry for many decades.²⁰⁴ Simon Armitage, one of the most well known of contemporary British poets, took a BA in geography at Portsmouth Polytechnic before becoming a poet. His first pamphlet collection is called *Human Geography*.²⁰⁵ Recently he has evangelized about the relationship between geography and poetry arguing that geography (through the theme of place) is the one continuous strand in the canon of British poetry.²⁰⁶ There has recently been a 'creative turn' amongst geographers seeking to more fully engage with the possibilities of creative writing (and other practices) in their own work. A recent issue of the *Geographical Review*, for instance, was entirely taken up with geographers along with artists and other writers writing (creatively) around geographical themes.²⁰⁷ One of the editors of this collection, Sarah

²⁰³ Ibid. p.46.

²⁰⁴ Appleton J. (1975) *The Experience of Landscape*, London: Wiley.

²⁰⁵ Armitage S. (1988) *Human Geography*, Huddersfield: Smith/Doorstop.

²⁰⁶ See the video at

<http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/04/19/simon-armitage-interview_n_1437366.html>.

²⁰⁷ Marston SA and De Leeuw S. (2013) Creativity and Geography: Toward a Politicized Intervention. *Geographical Review* 103: iii-xxvi.

de Leeuw, is both a geographer and a prize-winning poet.²⁰⁸

While geographers have occasionally become practicing poets, poets have frequently enrolled the word “geography” in their poetic practice. In addition to Armitage we have Elizabeth Bishop’s *Geography III* and Ed Dorn’s more modernist collection, *Geography*.²⁰⁹ Recently, reflecting times marked by the processes of globalization, hybridity and diasporic population movements, there has been a plethora of poets using “geography” in their titles to connote the themes of belonging and lack of belonging that have become prevalent themes in an increasingly mobile modern world. Kapka Kassabova, in her poem and collection titled *Geography for the Lost*, mobilises geography to illuminate a world of displacement and migration – of being permanently in a process of translation: “The outlines of the hills are clear, very clear. / The stones are full of stately glee. / We don’t know what has brought us here. / We don’t know what will make us flee.”²¹⁰ The Canadian poet, Gillian Wigmore, meanwhile, uses geography to signify intimate landscapes in a small working town in northern British Columbia in her book *Soft Geography*.

if here is the centre
of my own geography
and I am the remembrance

²⁰⁸ de Leeuw S. (2012) *Geographies of a Lover*, Edmonton: NeWest Press.

²⁰⁹ Bishop E. (2008 [1971]) *Geography III*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Dorn E. (1965) *Geography*, London: Fulcrum Press.

²¹⁰ Kassabova K. (2007) *Geography for the Lost*, Auckland, N.Z.: Auckland University Press.

of yours – how is it
we are so far from ourselves?
we are so close
we are almost attached²¹¹

The collections of Kassabova and Wigmore are, on the face of it, very different. One reflects on an immigrant world in a vaguely specified landscape and the other conveys a sense of intimacy in a precisely defined world – the small worlds of human relations and the large landscapes they dwell in. “Geography” is a felixible and evocative part of the poet’s tool kit.

The origins of my own identity as a geographer-poet are hard to place exactly. As an undergraduate I recall reading the geographer Donald Meinig’s essay ‘Geography as an Art’, an essay I returned to when thinking about writing this. ‘Could geographers actually create literature as well as borrow from it?’ he wrote, ‘I see nothing in the logic, needs, or possibilities of our field to prohibit it.’²¹² At the end of his essay he asserted that his paper was ‘a call . . . for greater openness, a clearing away of pedantic barriers, for a toleration of geographical creativity wherever it may lead’. ‘We shall not have a humanistic geography worthy of the claim’, he continued, ‘until we have some of our most talented and sensitive scholars deeply engaged in the creation of the literature of the humanities. Geography will deserve to be called an art only when a substantial number of geographers become

²¹¹ Wigmore G. (2007) *Soft Geography*, Madeira Park, BC: Caitlin Press.

²¹² Meinig D. (1983) Geography as an Art. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 8: 314–28, 318.

artists'.²¹³ Early on in the process of becoming a published poet I was keen to divorce my years as an academic geographer from my emerging identity as a poet. I wanted to be taken seriously as a poet for poetry alone, and not for the geographical baggage I brought to my writing. As time has progressed I have settled in to the 'geographer-poet' hybrid label and realized that my preoccupations as a cultural geographer are a passion that it would be foolish to leave out of my poetry. Such a separation is, anyway, impossible as the poems repeatedly return to themes of place, displacement and journey. I am now happy to begin to answer Meinig's call for geographers as artists. With this in mind allow me to consider some of the ways in which my own poems engage in theme and form with a number of different geographies.

Both *Soil* and *erratic* refer to meso-level concepts of place and (un)belonging. "Soil" refers directly to the concept of dwelling originating in Heidegger and since developed by others. The vertical depth of layers of soil provides a home for notions of rootedness and has often been metaphorically mobilized to denote belonging. Most infamously this was a key part of Nazi ideology leading up to and during World War Two where "blood and soil" was a rallying cry for Aryan identity (in part inspired directly by Heidegger). While Aryans were said to spring from the rich dark soils of the Black Forest, Jews, gypsies and gay people were said to be rootless - described as either snakes in the desert of disconnected city dwellers. The Nazis were hardly the first to do this however. The idea of being born from the soil is encapsulated by the term "autochthon" - a term which combines the Ancient Greek terms for

²¹³ Meinig, 'Geography as an Art', p. 328

“self” and “soil”. Autochthons do not come from anywhere - they belong exactly where they are. Ancient Athenians believed themselves to be an autochthonous city-state composed of people who had always been there. This idea was encapsulated in the myth of King Erichthonius. Erichthonius was a legendary early king of Athens who was raised by the goddess Athena. The legend tells of Athena visiting Hephaestus to have some weapons made. Hephaestus tries to seduce Athena and when his advances are rejected he chases her and tries (unsuccessfully) to rape her. Some of his semen falls on Athena’s thigh during the struggle and she wipes it off with some wool and throws the wool on the ground. Erichthonius is said to be born from the mingling of semen and soil. Many other cultures believe themselves to be autochthonous including many indigenous cultures of North America who contest the contemporary notion that humans arrived on the continent by crossing a land bridge from the Eurasian continent.

The themes developed in *Soil* are continued in the newer poems of *erratic*. My first use of the word ‘erratic’ is in reference to a boulder that has been moved by ice during the last glaciation and then deposited once the ice retreated. It is now a rock out of place – surrounded by ‘native’ stones of an entirely different type. ‘Erratic’ is the word used by geologists and geomorphologists to describe such a rock. But there are more interesting stories held by the word erratic which, it turns out, is linked to words such as ‘error’ and ‘wanderer’. Nomadic people were once called ‘erratic’ too. We use the word ‘erratic’ in regular speech to refer to things which appear to be irregular or inconsistent. The word ‘erratic’ then appears to have

considerable potential for my poetic obsessions. It also points to the opposite of the dominant mythologies of 'soil' with its suggestions of consistency and rootedness.

The poems in *Soil* and *erratic* are concerned with this idea of belonging and place and many of them directly challenge the more reactionary implications of the soil=belonging metaphor. Some, for instance, are thematically focused on things, animals and plants out of place. A fox climbs the Shard at night ('The Fox and the Skyscraper'), plants, which rely on lead in the soil, grow around old lead mines ('Rare Metallophytes'), parakeets gather in Acton trees ('Parakeets'). 'Erratic' focuses on an erratic boulder that has been where it doesn't belong for 10,000 years. A whale turns up on the beach of a small town in Canada ('Beached'). Other poems are more self-focused.

'Moved' reflects on my recent move from London to Boston and how the new world I am in seems a little askew (wild turkeys have replaced parakeets).

'Newfoundland' finds me in St John's trying to understand a place I have never been while reflecting on the fact that I have flown over it dozens of time en-route between the UK and North America. A sequence of prose poems are titled 'Human Geography' and they recount fragments of my own travelling life attending conferences in relation to the things that continue at home. The poems in *erratic* are increasingly focused on the movements of people. Two series of poems in *erratic* have the ways we move as a central feature. The 'Desire Lines' poems are derived from the term planners use for the paths we erode into the soil as we take short cuts and refuse to follow the formal paths. The 'Instantaneous Letter Writer' poems are found poems

which use lines from a late nineteenth century book which was designed to replace lines often used in telegrams with simple codes in order to reduce expense. Here I have used lines related to travel to construct poems.

The topopoetics of my own poems in *Soil* and *erratic* are not limited to theme however. I also tentatively play around with form to make the poems into particular kinds of experience of displacement. 'The Fox and the Skyscraper' uses a long narrow shape to build a sense of the act of climbing the Shard. 'Littoral' is thematically concerned with the fractal nature of the undefined zone between land and water. This is reflected in a space filled irregular form that looks (I hope) unformed on the page – with blank space mingling with dark presence of the words. It is not just unconventional forms which are used to reflect on (un)belonging however. 'First Snow' concerns the birth of my first child during a snow storm. I have chosen to use a sonnet form for the poem. The neat blocks of print on the page combined with the 'turn' half way through the ninth line (which I split into two both horizontally and vertically) are meant to convey the significance of the event alongside my disorientation which is conveyed in the last five and half lines. The split line spatially conveys discombobulation in an otherwise well-defined event. In *erratic* a number of poems explore the possibilities of replacing punctuation with more space in order to produce a more spacey, minimal aesthetic that I enjoy in the poetry of others. Both 'Moved' and 'Rialto Beach' use this technique. Often I employ shorter lines roughly seven syllables long (based on the Welsh Englyn Milwr form) as they demand a simpler minimal syntax that mirrors a sense of space that I am aiming for. This is true, for instance, in

'An Anthill in Canada'. The increased focus on travel in *erratic* involved using form to develop momentum in poems – emphasizing the vertical (shorter lines and a 'long' appearance on the page) rather than the horizontal. Line breaks and enjambment became particularly important in drawing the reader down the page (see 'Newfoundland', 'An Anthill in Canada' and 'Desire Lines' poems for instance).

My hope is that my poems might be thought of as places, even if slightly anxious places, that reflect my interest in the gaps between people and place that make Heidegger-like belonging always deferred. I have attempted to match form to content – to allow the way the poems are structured to help to convey the things the poems are about. The layering of larger themes (denoted by the titles *Soil* and *erratic*), the repetition of themes and images across poems (displaced things, journeys etc.) and the micro-level mechanics involved in the construction of each poem on the page are designed to congeal into a sustained engagement with place both as form and as subject. They are poems *as* places and poems *about* places.

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Poems from *Soil* and *erratic*

From *Soil*

The Fox and the Skyscraper

Oh fox, in Japan they speak of *Kitsune*,
with nine full bushy tails who waited
for a hundred years to turn into a woman,
a beautiful lover to encounter alone
in the twilight. And in Arkansas,
Uncle Remus wove yarns of the trickster,
Bre'r Fox, who mixed tar with cloth
to fool a rabbit. Here we sing you,
oh *Reynardine*, the ware-fox, who wandered
out late with shining teeth, taking
farmers' daughters to his castle
in the mountains. And the nameless fox
who went out on a winter's night
and prayed to the moon
to give him light before he reached
the town-o. And the fox who ran
as fast he could and caught and ate
the gingerbread man. And the fox
who couldn't get the highest,
sweetest grapes. And *Fox in Sox!*
And the fox in Southwark
who climbed the stairs and ladders
seventy-three storeys to
the top of the Shard, grazing
on half eaten kielbasa and jellied
pork-pie crusts discarded
by the carpenters and glaziers,
and every fox cell in hairs, nose
and notched ear hummed
as he sat exhausted, rank

as any fox, gazing
out across London.

A glass of water

They say this glass of London water passed through eight bodies
before mine.

Starting near Heathrow. A Sikh cabby. The morning shift.
Then teacher between classes, a young woman, Kiwi, fit to burst.
A Southall market seller, bagging mangoes and bitter gourd.
A man who lives on a Brentford boat, pissing straight into the Thames.
Kevin, who drank six pints last night and has a killer thirst.
A gardener at Kew tending orchids blooming just one day.
Carrie, just up from bed still red-raw from energetic sex.
And old man Andy, up the road, downing morning pills.

They say my body is sixty percent this. Blood. Spit. Plasma. Piss.
A constant whoosh and sluice. Tidal. Tethered to the moon
like a walking thinking sea. I half expect to stretch and flop -
a water balloon about to pop and drench my neighbour
on the tube with my multitude of juices
in waves – six small splashes then a seventh monster –
enough to drown the underground.

Phase shift

A light turns on. Through a window a man in shorts is ironing –
two towers stand dark against the Acton evening –

red tiled roofs, terracotta chimney pots – a line of lights sinking
in strict tempo to Heathrow beyond the spires and officeblocks.

The man is folding shirts, his life marked by the widespread presence
of mammals and flowering plants –

the rumble of a skateboard, the humdrum of cars on the Westway.
He is a geological force to be reckoned with.

The door closes behind him, the light still on. A cat creeps
along a walltop, across the road, down an alley. Sodium lights pop.

The street submits to echoes and foxes. In the morning
the dustbin men appear with their dayglo and intricate systems

in a place that could spend millions of years buried
and still blackbirds wake me up in spring,

in this city that reveals through crushed structures
that it is unlike melancholy for instance.

Rowan

One spring of blossoms—
pink petals littered the streets
from our first floor window—then

they chopped down
the cherry trees
outside our house.

In from the hinterlands
came Mountain Ash,
Rowan—

municipal trees
with feathered leaves
and tight fistled berries

for drunken birds to guzzle.
Everywhere, they loiter
unnoticed, ubiquitous

filtering urban air.
Tidy. Low maintenance.
Respectful.

But think of them far north
or at higher altitude,
red berries

against snow:
all shamelessness
and attitude.

Rare Metallophytes

Spring sandwort, alpine penny-cross,
mountain pansy: disaster lovers,
first on the scene of the misery
of ruptured earth, hanging on,
facing off, digging in. Coping
in the hinterlands of old lead mines.

Two months of cheerful, tufted
fuck-yous to the shafts and pylons left
by the dirt-encrusted hands and
steel-hard biceps of those who trucked off
the malleable metal for pistol shot,
roof flashing, batteries, radiation shields.

First Snow

Your skull was still inside your mother
as they twisted in a screw attached to
a wire attached to a monitor which re-
layed sounds of your heart racing, stalling
and then racing. I saw the blood
trickle down between her legs. The room smelled
of batteries, sweat. Low pressure brings on birth,
the midwife said, as if the snow outside
might suck you out.

I drive our old
duck-egg Volvo through the reconfigured
city – I am Scott or Admundsen –
the first man in an unmapped land longing
for trig points, the pole star in a cold sky
the certainties of magnetic north.

Human Geography I

I wake to the glow of LEDs and the murmur of Radio 4 – get up naked in the gloom – a plane to catch – my clothes piled on the landing, outside the room where my wife still sleeps – through the lifting fog I brush teeth and down pills – past dreaming kids – a hurried tea and toast - out the door to the blue light of a city half awake.

I am familiar with airports – feel at home there – know their codes and customs - I've learnt to read the signs – black on yellow – the two colours with maximum contrast – easy to see and follow. I stand in lines – know my place – unbuckle my belt – put my shoes in plastic trays – reveal my identity – know the difference between business and pleasure. I travel light with my MacBook Air – check in online – know all the best seats – maximum pitch – extra legroom – exit rows.

I'm comfortable in airports – stripped of all decision-making powers – while away the hours reading the business section or reviews of books I ought to read – watching planes through plate glass windows think of boyhood's *Observer's Book of Aircraft*.

Sometimes I think I'd like to stop – start relationships with sediments – dry stone walls. Write about ravens or rivers of ice cracking in glaciers. I want to hear it sing – catch the ringing of a thrush breaking snails on stones. These are just facts and things.

My plane is boarding – number's called. I heft my bag – get in line – show my passport one last time. Weightless – down the ramp into the plane and find my seat.

Volunteers

In

between

the certainties

of paving stones

weeds have appeared.

Someone, long ago

measured to the

nearest centimeter

this yard, and chose

which stones to lay.

I fancy that they disagreed

on shades of red and grey.

And then, for scent,

they planted

beds of lavender and

climbing roses.

But now we're here

and through the grout

I see the rebel heads

of dandelions,

bindweed, clover,

nettles and

who-knows-what?

begin to sprout.

And there
amongst them all
a familiar form
lies bent

under the weight
of seven green fruit –
and one quite red.
A tomato plant

as unintended
as any weed
muscles out the vagabonds
and volunteers its load.

Littoral

this

is where

the lugworms live samphire grows

water

deposits

its salt

crabs crawl side –

ways

and dunes

creep

imperceptibly

old bottles for medicines

and ginger beer

appear

and disappear

saltmarsh

bog bodies

estuary mud

the negation of

measurement

the invention of fractals

migrant birds

make temporary

homes

archaeology emerges

old harbours
inscrutable circles of stone

someone swore
they saw
the shadow of a ship

and twice a year
on a lowest tide
stumps and trunks
of petrified trees
bring rumours of
Atlantis!

Myxamatoxis, 1970s

We found a rabbit –
crazy – lolloping
in the trees with
sightless eyes
in a swollen head.

The merciful thing
was to kill it.

Kick it hard or
bash its brains out.

We hung it
spinning from
a branch and hit it
with a stick –
sending it
into orbit,
till its body split
in two, spraying
a Catherine wheel
of blood and liquid
rabbit shit
that covered us
in reek and gunge
that stayed with us
for weeks.

This happened.

I was there.

Wormwood Jam

Before the devil pisses on berries.

Late September. Blackberrying down the
Scrubs – by high high helixes of razor
wire. Filling plastic peanut-butter pots
with blackred fruit. Brimfull. Soursharp. Inky.
Imploding sweet - squashed by over-eager
fingers - gashing hands on brambles that could
pull the wool from sheep. Gambling on low fruit
slashed on by Shepherds and Rottweilers.

The kitchen filled with blackberry. Cauldrons
of redblack boiling glop. I tried to catch
the setting point – risking burns and blisters –
my finger forming surface crinkles through
bloodthick syrup on a frozen saucer.

Human Geography II

Consider a woman walking down stairs. It's raining outside – city tarmac glistens – it's cold for March – her head full of poems: mountains, food, and a lover she has lost. Many years together with dogs, recipes, music – walks they took – forests, islands, snow, desert sand by cactus plants – and the meals they shared – oh what meals, what perfect pumpkin soups, what farmhouse cheese, what singular oranges – and what salmon – especially salmon – fresh – smoked – salt as sea – sweet as toffee. Cookbooks bear the stains of chocolate, wine, tomatoes – fingerprints of life together.

A man sits at the bottom of the stairs drinking beer and smoking. He doesn't usually smoke but the rush of nicotine reminds him of a woman he once knew – a woman who could shake the rain out of the air. Together they had travelled. Once, after making love in a caravan in Spain, they had shared a shower – she had led him back to bed still wet, and made love to him again. This moment filled his life – he wanted it back.

Imagine lines around the world – his lines – her lines – traces of their lives. Their lines have crossed before in Amsterdam by the Rijksmuseum – in Bombay and San Francisco – in New York City somewhere on the Lower East Side. They have driven the Mississippi north. They have passed through JFK, ORD and LAX. They have been ticketed, photographed, fingerprinted, identified – welcomed through to airside. They have walked. Their feet have stepped over the shadows of chewing gum – stopped as they watched skateboarders flipping tricks – stumbled over curbs and cracks in pavements. Their feet have done hard miles in ill-fitting shoes, blistered, swollen in heat – urgent on Fifth Avenue, cacophonous in Seoul, languid in Lisbon. As they walk they take little bits of places with them – they cut desire

lines across the grass. They have pressed themselves upon the earth
and the earth is different now.

Footnote

Foot.²¹⁴ Note.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ A term used in poetics to describe the rhythm of things –
the beat of sounds
the end of limbs
the bearer of weight
an archaic unit of measurement
our attachment to the earth

²¹⁵ A reminder
a command to pay attention
a small sheet of paper
currency – a high denomination
a term used in music to describe a single sound –
its pitch and its duration

Woman as Landscape

Listen. I know it's wrong to conflate
the female body with land
what with all the history that's freighted with
but there was this woman on the radio
who said she had a landscape
imprinted on her heart.

Now, I'm no cartographer but I liked – no, *loved* –
this woman's voice –
from somewhere near a different sea –
and as I made my coffee
I saw the soil in her blood swooshing along
with the clotting agents and hemoglobin
and roads marked out from synapse to synapse,
conglomerations gathering behind her knees;
main streets of half abandoned cowboy towns
with saloon doors and dust devils jammed
between her toes, twin cantinas with three
kinds of homemade salsa right behind her nipples.

I thought of her waking to the squeek of a swinging
stoplight, local radio buzzing in her ears,
paper mills and marsh gas flickering in her eyes.

I'm sure she knows the names of birds.

Parakeets

Forty of you were released
during the filming of *The African Queen*,
or maybe by Jimi Hendrix!
Rumours. In any case,
you're a new entry among the top twenty
garden birds of Britain, dashing
integrating with blackbirds and blue tits.

Your green tails
flash from tree to tree between Ealing chimneys.
We hear you, gathered in gangs, calling
and squawking along the oak branches of Acton.

Watch it—
they've got it in for you, fearing the displacement
of woodpeckers, nuthatches and starlings,
the 'alien invasive' starlings introduced to Central Park,
NYC, along with every bird mentioned in Shakespeare.

There's talk
of a cull. For my part, I hope the colour
and screech of Mysore and Mogadishu
does not dwindle into cartographic memory
like smallpox and the Roman Empire.

Possible Pubs

| | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| meet me | at the rush and shiver |
| take me | to the pat and tap |
| meet me | at the pluck and quiver |
| take me | to the tickle and clap |
| seek me | by the curve and flutter |
| find me | in the wince and snide |
| seek me | by the trust and stutter |
| find me | in the pulse and slide |
| see me | at the luck and couple |
| join me | near the kiss and skew |
| see me | at the curse and suckle |
| join me | near the wreck and screw |
| hold me | in the wrench and stare |
| drink with me love | drink with me there |

Human Geography III

My love moves through the house alone. She empties the cat litter – lines the compost bin with Saturday's *Guardian* – folds the children's clothes. She puts lists on the fridge and post-it notes inside which read "always wrap the cheese!" She moves the knife from the counter's edge. She writes a note to school and makes a call to arrange a birthday party. There are always envelopes in the bureau – I have not bought envelopes since I can't remember when. She does the work of love, of maintenance.

I am elsewhere. I am not there.

She is the Queen of Entropy. She notices decay. The places where the paint has chipped – the window frames need another coat – the gaps between the floorboards where cork has crumbled letting cold air in – the picture hung askew – the curtain where it ripped. She broods over the dust on the baseboards, disappointed by the stains the dishwasher leaves, surprised that the laundry bin is full again.

I am abroad. I am traveling.

Between tasks she thinks of other places. Honeymoon rickshaws amongst the water buffalo – a fast flowing stream near Uncle Ken's Mount Mitchell – a bookshop in Dupont Circle – her dormroom at Duke. She feels the sand on a beach on Cardigan Bay from where she watched the dolphins. She hears the sadness of sheep and the rapid-fire mew of the Kite.

I leave. I fly out. I take taxis.

Does she picture me in restaurants in Buenos Aires, Taipei, Chicago –
conjure interesting people for me to talk to – see me in green hotel
rooms – trace my lines of flight around the globe - place me in
basement bars drinking beer? Does she sit me on the right-hand side
of the aircraft so I spy our house on the descent into Heathrow?

Turn

after Tam Lin, *Child Ballad 39*

you can turn me in your arms

into Jack-of-the-green

you can turn me in your arms

into all-of-a-lather

you can turn me in your arms

into change-in-the-weather

you can turn me in your arms

three sixty degrees

you can turn me in your arms

into froth and foam

you can turn me in your arms

into the things that I said

you can turn me in your arms

an expletive deleted

you can turn me in your arms

into midnight moan

I will turn you in my arms

into dervishing light

I will turn you in my arms

into 2 x 3

I will turn you in my arms

into whatever I please

I will turn you in my arms

into extra time, a skipped beat

you can turn me in your arms

into a naked man

hold fast and fear not

I'll be myself again

City Break

The smart hotel in Lisbon
we ran to in foreign rain,

child-free and eager,
touching more, together,

duvet discarded, a new
city outside. Who'd have guessed

the whole shebang was on the verge
of economic ruin?

What mattered? Me inside you.
The absence of necessity.

Human Geography IV

Let's walk from Acton Main Line and the airport train down Horn Lane – dried out, jet-lagged – through morning air not yet tinged with disappointment – smell diesel and jet fuel from lorries and planes ascending west. Let's listen to the planes – the bass note rumble – the high whine of throttle-up – the idle rattle of queuing cars. Listen to the mother staying calm, or trying to, as she shepherds kids to school. Inhale cement-works dust. Pass the Africans outside Acton Cabs – the Polish delis with their unintelligible sausages – the cactus pears and passion fruit spilling out over the pavement – Sam's fried chicken and the pawn shop.

I don't stop – the world goes the other way as I come home. The end of something amongst all these beginnings. My desire lines collapse behind me as I come to the front door. The leaves need sweeping – there's litter in the hedgerow – cigarette butts, fast food boxes, crisp packets – salt and vinegar, someone's sock. Pages from the *Metro*.

Opening the door – chaos – the shoes fall out across the hall – the recycling is full – that crack that needs filling. Still. In my memory this place had attained some kind of order in my absence. There's breakfast dishes in the sink and still-warm coffee in the bottom of the mug.

Later I tell stories of travels – things tasted – conversations related approximately – gifts disgorged – at attempt to undersell perhaps – fighting jetlag – back into the swing of things – shopping – kids to school – make like I never left.

Synesthesia

I came. And in the Interlude
she tells me she orgasmed
blue. Blue like movies? Blue like sad?
Is that why she cries sometimes?
Half asleep she shook her head.
No. Really. It was fine.

She sinks to sleep, leaving me
alone with the digital
green alarm glow and sodium
orange through the gaps around
the velux blinds. A late jumbo
throttles up and noses over Harlesden.

From *erratic*

er·rat·ic *adjective* \i-'ra-tik\ : acting, moving, or changing in ways that are not expected or usual : not consistent or regular **1 a** : having no fixed course: *wandering* <an *erratic* comet> **b** *archaic* : *nomadic* **2** : transported from an original resting place especially by a *glacier* <an *erratic* boulder> **3 a** : characterized by lack of consistency, regularity, or uniformity <*erratic* dieting> <keeps *erratic* hours> **b** : *deviating* from what is ordinary or standard : *eccentric* <an *erratic* genius>

Desire Lines (1)

There's tracks across the park
to the gap in the fence through
the carefully planted
hedge

I'm grinning

they're everywhere:
on floors of palaces
the hotel atrium foyers
of hospitals and headquarters
transecting terminals linking arrivals
with departures.

In Finland, planners rise before dawn
to map the footprints
in snow's blank geography.

Erratic

Sitting there for all the world
as if you owned the place.
An error. Bluestone among
chalk. Wanderer. Heretic.
Stowaway, suspended as the world
warmed leaving you upended –
culture-shocked and oversized.
Your crystals milky,
opaque, glittering.
Brimming with another kind of
winter. Fire and freeze. Ten
thousand years of exile –
now part of the scenery.

Fulgarites

The most fleeting things are forever if you know where to look.

I googled them - spotted one on ebay.

'Lightning power in the palm of your hand'!

Mostly, they

scatter the Sahara suggesting

the presence

of rain or

Zeus or

Thor

the opposite of sedimentary -

petrified milliseconds

formed in

a flash

when quick high volts struck

shifting sands

quartz and

silicon

fused into glass of a sort -

tubular molds in

the shape of

less than

a blink

of an

eye

such as the stegosaur's. The only witness to the fireworks

and thunder when the oldest ones were formed.

An Instantaneous Letter Writer by Mail or Telegraph (1) ²¹⁶

I fear I shall not succeed in accomplishing the object for which I came
to this place

Health is much poorer than when leaving home

I shall not remain in this place as long as I expected; will give you
notice before I leave

This is a place enjoying high religious privileges

We are now off; the weather pleasant, but a rough sea

I received a slight injury

We had a fine carriage and good horses

Some of the passengers were killed by the accident

I am apprehensive that the air of this place will not be conducive to
health

The journey was attended with no more fatigue than was expected

I have been able to accomplish the business for which I came to this
place to my satisfaction

The company here is very agreeable

I received an injury which I fear may prove serious

It is impossible for me now to fix upon a time for my return

²¹⁶ These lines are taken from *The traveler's vade mecum: or, Instantaneous letter writer by mail or telegraph* by A. C. Balwin (1853). The book attempts to give a number to a range of sentences likely to be used in a telegram – thus saving on the costs of sending one (by reducing the number of characters).

Nest Site Fidelity

Where Ospreys are few, a sight like this brings
caravans of camera crews. They're back from

wintering in Mexico, skywriting jagged
'm' s and 'v' s, then plummeting,

talons slicing brackish water, rising
with a prize menhaden. I fish for perch

as they swoop and climb and *kyew kyew kyew* to
warn me off the chicks. Each March they return

to the knotted nest they knit - the tumbledown
stick-and-sod summer-home on the platform Bill built

out on the creek, here on the Chesapeake.

The Emperor of Japan once visited Wales to see

the 'rare' Red Kite I saw on my daily drive cresting
the rise above Talsarn, the Irish Sea spread out before me.

Blues Sonnet for Lost Birds

Pigeons echo, from the roof and the linden trees
Pigeons echo from the roof, from the linden trees

Swallows swerve and chase down flies
Swallows from Johannesburg, tracing the sky

Yellow-bellied flycatchers seen at Blakeney Point
Yellow-bellied blow-ins rest at Blakeney Point

Tower block falcons fall
Tate Modern falcons. Falcons on St Paul's

Buzzards gather, circle overhead
Buzzards on the interstate, something must be dead

Red-winged blackbirds tumble down, down in Arkansas
Red-winged blackbirds on the ground, down in Arkansas

The cuckoo she's a pretty bird, she warbles as she flies
The cuckoo was a pretty bird, she never said goodbye

Still

I watched
one on a
wooden porch
south of the Mason-
Dixon Line flying
at the feeder,
invisible wings -
bumblebee impossible -
tonguing sugar-water.

Among Mastadons
and granite,
skeletons
and meteorites,
the cabinet
of hummingbirds
stops me short.

Desire Lines (2)

Irresponsible passions take us wayward
when snowfall blanks the waysigns.
Ignoring the planners' paths, strollers' shortcuts
contour our utopia, until
angels, made by children, turn to water.

Incomers

We thought we might stay. Grow raspberries,
plant a tree. Have children born at home
who could always say where they were from.

An old post house painted lemon atop
an overgrazed hill in west- Wales.
The fields were cemeteries for Subaru,

railway sleepers, old steel sinks, irrigation
tubing, barbed wire rolls, assorted nails,
screws, rivets. A tractor from before the war.

There's little profit in sheep. The Russians stopped
buying fleece when their economy
collapsed. Heritage parks and go-kart tracks

spread like bungalows and satellite discs
beside the roads. Incomers from England
farm organically taking

half-hearted Welsh lessons in the
community centre. We buy
old farmhouses, fancy this

the new Cotwolds. Tuscany even.
The ubiquitous grey repainted
with heritage shades from Fired Earth.

Idris, the King of the junkheap,
knows nothing of permaculture,

post-peak oil, transition towns. He collects

four wheel drives and junk to sell to us –
the do-it-uppers who overvalue
everything. Midwives from London fail

to convince farmer's wives of the
benefits of home birth. They line up
for C-sections, thankful for progress.

Beached

Fishermen find it at dawn, spread across the tidal zone.

Workers from the shopping mall take lunch breaks on the seawall.

Agnes Connolly starts slipping global warming into casual conversation.

Townsfolk take turns taking photos with it, gathered in family groups, some statue-proud, others waving two-fingered peace signs.

Down at the dealership sales of pick-up trucks pick up.

Parents, half-cut on Shiraz, read stories to their kids.

Children circle, dare to touch, learn its heart is the size of a Volkswagen Bug and a three-ton tongue. John Connor lets it be known in furtive whispers that it has a ten foot-cock.

Three members of the Rotary Club resign.

Old man Jude, at number 79, complains of a sweet sick smell.

Some see it as a sign. Wailing is heard from the Methodist church – the minister intones a litany of species.

Its body begins to bloat, blow up – a balloon about to float away.

Clouds of stink waft landward. The librarian carefully catalogues references. Rancid bacon grease, rotten fish, eggs, cat pee,

concentrated cow-farts. It might become bearable, she thinks, with the right words.

Jim O'Leary, while making love to his mistress, imagines his semen forming clouds of milky nebula in the briny dark.

The *Wolverines* end a season-long losing streak in the dying moments.

There are rumors of exploding whales at *Foodland* and at the bowling alley. Methane accumulates. #explodingwhale appears on Twitter. Updates on *hasthewhaleexplodedyet.com*. In dreams, whale bits rain down, whale-juice coats the town in an oily blubber-sheen.

Mothers avoids the sea front, take roundabout routes to the movies, peep through gaps between curtains. Hotels stay vacant.

It is generally agreed that something should be done.

Max Jenkins goes the wrong way home. Finds himself, key in hand, at number 41.

Young Bill Shaughnessy, who never speaks to his parents, can't stop talking. Says he saw two white tigers strolling the lapping waves under a full moon, rubbing their flanks against the its grooved throat.

Kate McConnell, a lifelong omnivore, finds herself disgusted by bacon, starts hoarding kale chips.

Lives fill with whale-chat or silence. It expands. The stink creeps down thoroughfares, along back alleys, curls around cats, seeps through grates and gaps into ductwork, sweaters, high performance fleece. Masks are issued.

Dick Declan, while watching birds, sees a Labrador Duck, long thought extinct.

An artist arrives from Whitehorse to film the slow decay, how the blubber sags and falls away. An artist from Yellowknife requests secret mementos to arrange along the beach. Miss Levine's Grade Five art class suggest five hot air balloons, decorated, whale-shaped, launching from the beach at dusk.

Plans are hatched. Dynamite. It could be burned, or buried where it lay. Tow it out to sea, laden with old train-wheels. Adam Smith, a local anthropologist, dropping all pretense to objectivity, declares the whale divine (in the tradition of Austro-Asiatic cultures), suggests a funeral. Incense would be burned, libations poured, a sand temple constructed.

Museum men arrive, fillet with flensing knives. Strips of blubber, meat and muscle pile on the sand. They are greedy for bones – a skeleton in the central hall! A place to meet.

Suddenly fearing its absence, the Mayor suggests a waterfront display – something for kids and tourists. Educational, but fun. Townsfolk cluster in circles, sing shanties. Hold a candlelit vigil.

When the work is done and all that's left are bones, they ship them out on Mack trucks.

Rialto Beach

first the carnage

silverwhite trees wave-toppled and gale-gusted

strewn along the beach sun bleached dinosaur bones

next the balancing acts of stonestacks a lone conifer

clings to invisibly thin soil knots of bull-kelp

like spilled leviathan seed fetid and fly-ridden anemones in rock
pools

beckon me to finger their sticky tongues

a bald eagle circles hounded by ravens

we keep on holding on hoping for the best

settling for something like circumstance

in the black basaltic sand mingled with milk white

and amber agates smooth ground sea glass jewels

amongst the fallen trunks clunking chunks of rusted ship-iron

scattered fishing floats a black plastic buoy

a walker tells me of the wreck

the Chilean ship the marker round the headland for the drowned

In a Station of the Underground

Out of the underground,
hot from the
crowds.

Streetlights mirrored
in the storefront,
rainbow in the oil,

rain snaking down
a Perspex screen.
Don't speak to me

of rivers, salmon
leaping falls,
a forest's bluebell haze

or granite scoured
by ice.
A woman weaves

against the flow
heading home
her face a full moon.

At the Coffee Stand

It's one of those days in the East Village
that wraps around your body and threatens
breath itself. On 7th Street a man
with a three-day beard and a woman in a vest grind beans,
make coffee. Kenyan single-estate permeates air
as he slits the brown paper bag with a wood-handled knife.
Couples perch on curbs or nearby steps.
Blackboards stand beside the counter, options chalked, prices,
geographies of origins and ethics.
Someone has sketched a green and yellow vine
winding around the list. The woman in a vest
with coffee-brown arms talks to us like we're friends,
asks about our days, tells the woman in front
how much she likes her turquoise earrings,
that she and her companion make a lovely couple.
And it's true, they do. They look like they made love
this morning, have nothing particularly pressing.
She orders a latte with full-fat milk, he a black Americano.
Baseball cap man spins a jar of cinnamon in the air
while talking to his partner.
The jar spins three, four times, lands
in his hand. Everything's connected. Jars don't fall
and break, hands tamp grounds, press buttons,
steam shoots through tubes into scalding liquid
but no-one's burned. He is happy to be making coffee,
glad the beans are dark and oily,
that someone visited their place of origin,
and the workers are well paid.
What's that scent? Cocoa, caramel, nuts
something green and fresh, apricots?

Two figures cut a swathe through the line bundled
with backpacks and bags, thick matted hair, too many clothes.
He limps and she leans on a stick to steady her.
Conversations dwindle. Words tumble
–you abused me! never again! I’m warning you!
you’re a cunt – don’t threaten me – what you gonna do?
don’t ever threaten me you fuck!
– they stumble away. A latte and Americano
are on the counter. Earring woman fumbles for change,
her companion fixes on the ground.
Clouds break. Rain falls. Coffee drinkers shelter
under scaffolding. Rain speckles the redbrown walls,
drums a tattoo on the cast iron fire escapes.

An Instantaneous Letter Writer by Mail or Telegraph (2)²¹⁷

There is something wrong: I cannot tell what.

I think I shall not be very sick

We are now at which is but an indifferent place

The country through which we are passing is quite indifferent

There will be a larger supply of pork than usual this season

I fear you are too gay

The accident was trifling

Your arrangement is agreeable to me, and we will both depend on it, if

you please

Consult your own fancy

Do you suspect anything out of the way?

Can security in any way be obtained?

I fear I shall not succeed in accomplishing the object for which I came

to this place

I am agreeably disappointed in this place

I apprehend that you are getting somewhat wild

Are any interests suffering particularly by my absence?

The worst remains to be told

Be sure and have it reduced to writing

²¹⁷ In *Instantaneous letter writer by mail or telegraph (2)* lines were chosen using the random integer generator at www.random.org. The randomness is derived from atmospheric noise.

Desire Lines (3)

I love its muddiness.
Rubbed bald. It's as if
we've worn a line into the land
like rabbits in the dunes
at Ynyslas,
dizzy with free will.

Newfoundland

A woman in St John's
said she liked my scarf
in a chock-full bookshop,
called *Afterwords*. It's a thing
to get shit-faced on George Street.
A band called "Quaker Parents"
plays at *The Ship*. People sound Irish.
The cod have long gone
but now there's oil.
There is dark rock, thick fog
and thin soil. To belong
for a while out-of-towners
can drink *screech*, kiss a cod
and repeat after them
"deed I is me ol' cock,
and long may your big jib draw".

I can't count the times I've flown over
sleepless, beat, following
the blue plane on the seatback's moving map.
Thirty one thousand feet,
counting down the miles.

In December, zero degrees,
unlikely clear blue sky, I'm driven
in a battered Subaru past the jellybean homes
to Cape Spear. Sea churns froth against
the rocks, a hollow-eyed
bunker stares down the grey Atlantic,
two lighthouses, one old,

one new. My companion,
a lanky local with scraggly beard,
recites the names of capes and coves –
Portugal Cove. Cuckold Cove.
Quidi Vidi. Cape Despair.
He speaks of moose on Water Street,
synclines, anticlines, short tailed weasels,
iron mines, the comforting absence of bears.
Back past Signal Hill, across the barrens
and into the boreal forest, above,
four, five, six white trails of planes
flying straight, in loose formation,
following an aerial highway west.

An Anthill in Canada

Pounding up the beaten track
eroded by dog walkers
and couples escaping tricks
that days play, we forked

left between the fireweed
and alder, spotted the mound
under the peeling stand
of paper birch, we knelt

listened, eyes closed, intent
on sounds under the shiver
of silver leaves and distant
road drone. The live earth quivered,

crackled, trembled, hissed: danced
with the energies of ants.

Emergency

There were moments, sure, like the time we caught
the hedgehog in the hole we dug at the bottom of the garden
covered with twigs like the lion-traps in *Tarzan*.

But mostly it was lazy loops on bikes around the agglomerate
playground with its plastic swings and broken glass.

No 'peat bogs'. No 'fireweed' or 'lemongrass' –

trees were all council saplings, wire-sheathed
to keep vandals out. The soil mostly rocks.

The opposite of 'boreal'. I never saw a badger or a fox

but perched at the end of the runway at the airforce base
I watched planes arrive and leave. Before texting or tweets
we reached for torches under our sheets,

pulled curtains back and flashed across the cul de sac –
Dot. Dot. Dot. Dash. Dash. Dash. Dot. Dot. Dot.

Quaker Meeting

What kind of silence is this – in this plain room?
High magpies chatter. Parakeets squawk and swarm.
Rolling snores, shuffling shoes, clock ticking seconds.
Lists hum. Bills. Poems. A hundred errands.
Paula reaches for water under her chair.
A jumbo throttles into atmosphere.

Here come the lurching wolves. Shadows appearing,
out of the aspen, into the clearing.
Also Wormwood Scrubs, the squealgrind of doors,
keyclatter, bootbeats on iron mesh floors.
Also Tutsis, Hutus, chant and dance – turning worms
churning compost on dusty Rwandan farms.
The mosquitobuzz of a bipolar surge.
Silence ends with smiling friends. Words. Emerge.

Wrong

December snowdrops
bloom in Kew
surrounded by
leafless trees
and mudpatched lawns.
Unfashionably early couples
at New Year's parties
amongst dishes
not yet done
the host still in jeans
shadows of an argument
ghosting the air.

Scale

Banks collapse, beds need changing, a girl
in a veil prepares to kill herself.
Iceland's for sale. Ironing piles up.
Food festers in the freezer's broken trays.
Fevers swarm in vectors, thick black arrows
thrust across the page, viruses spreading
from who knows where. Words, misheard, fall
pointlessly between us, on washcloths,
recipes, pot plants. In the troposphere,
atoms swerve, winds diverge, a lifting
air mass gifts a polar vortex.
They're forecasting snow and record lows.

Desire Lines (4)

Up on the common
where the bracken's thick
they criss-cross the land
revealing the settled
will of sheep.

One, somewhere
walked that line first
a maverick
in terra incognita.

And then the first follower

Car Plant

There's a Morris Minor in the yard
Morris Green, a sunny yellow sticker
from the seventies shouting
no thank you to nuclear power.
The car's name is *Bumble* or *Bramble*.
Sparrows nest on the wing mirror
green moss grows on the window frames
there are holes in the floor beneath
the mats. Flakes of rust
stain soil ochre. Old engine oil,
or brake fluid, spreads shadows.
Buddleia clings to wooden trim
drawing a rabble of Peacocks, Admirals,
Swallowtails. *Bumble*, or *Bramble*,
hosts xylem and phloem sucking
nutrients through tyres,
along axles, through the rear shocks
and brake pads, into the chassis.
Roots bore down from wheel wells
telling the soil-dwellers stories of day-trips
to the seaside and the passwords
of local girls who knew the secret
places where the keys were kept.

Foster Coat

A lamb is still-born
dies hung from the birth canal.
The farmer skins it while warm,
strips it like a rabbit from
throat to anus
keeping the fleece
free of blood and feces,
a foster coat
for another mother's
surplus lamb. He ties it
round the neck and belly,
smears the orphaned head
with afterbirth and dung.
The ewe, oblivious to loss
suckles its adopted young,
sensing itself on the surrogate.

Paddy bounds back
from a foray on the common,
sits by the kitchen door,
a fleece between his teeth.

Treehouse

Amongst the junk I find sleepers for struts,
tongue and groove floor and roof,

sturdy four by fours for corners. A broken
ladder. A circular saw.

A summer's work for a man with hands
that turn pages and chop onions. All this flotsam

reassembled. An HQ for gangland.
A still point outside the scatter and cacophony.

As I hammer and heft I think of
blackberry bushes, secret dry nettled ditches,

spaces where we used to play
imagining ourselves heroes, spies,

soldiers who never died. *Captain Scarlet!*
Blisters and calluses appear where

my fingers meet my palm. My arms grow tense
and sore. By summer's end I feel worthy, a better man.

I do it for them. The children aren't so sure.
"Cool" they say, and go back in.

Cardiac Examination

On the screen, the technician suggests,
mild regurgitation in swirling reds and blues
cyclones in Singapore, mum in a summer dress,
dad chasing butterflies with an oversize net.
There – that sound - systolic click
a swoosh of weddings where mum and dad
jitterbugged and everyone clapped
while granddad secretly slipped me cider.
This valve, he points, is billowing in a trivial way
and I'm fishing in a monsoon ditch with home-made
hooks and bacon rind. I caught a water snake,
danced barefoot in the grass till Dad arrived
to rescue me. This has no influence on life
expectancy, or the old Volvo's engine - with its twin
carburetors - that sat in the snow, shuddered
and coughed. My heart still regularly irregular,
planes drop steady descents along the Thames
in clockwork intervals over the rowing crews
bent into their exertions. Blood pressure 100/60,
heart rate 64 beats per minute, chest is clear.
Follow up in a year.

One Side

It's true he has no friends to speak of
but he seems happy enough. Doesn't he?
He's just shy. That's what it is.
I'm sick of all these diagnoses.
It used to be normal, didn't it, before
they made up words.
But really, he's got his things,
the maps and plans, the fantasy books,
his computer stuff. I know he won't
answer the phone and never looks a stranger
in the eye but it's not as though
he's torturing hamsters. Once he gets going
he'll talk for hours. God, he's even
taking driving lessons.
Imagine that - our son - driving!
No - I don't think he needs to see
someone, it'll only make it worse.
I'm sure he's fine. It's not that
I think it doesn't matter, it's just that I'm tired
and we have to sleep.

Ghazal Sonnet for London

Oh I loved the hum of you, the sudden
fancies, the falling for you – London.

The canal-top diesel sheen in Camden.
Ice cream on Kew Green – it's all in London.

Missed connections at Willesden Junction.
Seconds. Minutes. Stretching. Stalling in London.

Into rain and siren sounds of Acton
Central. Foxes caterwauling. London!

Once again I'm leaving – love abandoned.
Leaving my lovely sprawling London.

My god you're mean sometimes: bitter, rude, glum.
Your manners can be appalling, London.

London minus Tim is Tim plus Boston.
We're through! We're done! Elsewhere's calling, London.

Moved

I'm fresh off the boat a greenhorn everything is new
or the same just five degrees askew

no London parakeets just wild turkeys on Blake Street
dancing dinosaurs necks jerking animatronicly

they gang up on school kids winding their way
downhill at dawn there are rumours of injury

cicadas bow their seventeenth-year symphony
an off-beat Philip Glass diminuendo

which rattles hammers and anvils streams around
stirrups thrumming all the lesser bones

a Chinese woman sits beside the reservoir
dressed in a sweater a winter coat a baseball cap

it's 75 degrees she fishes for fish with foreign names
bullheads pickerel pumpkinseed

tops and tips of oaks flame
walnuts blacken sidewalks

I don't blink let colourwaves crash
over rods and cones contour my cortex

I open up sexed and sore
this new place enters me through every pore