

**Beating the Bounds: Exploring Borders and Scale
in Contemporary British Environmental Poetry**

Submitted by Ben Oliver Sebastian Smith to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English (Creative Writing) in September 2012.

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Abstract

This work consists of a collection of poetry, *Lessons in Augury*, preceded by a thesis, 'Beating the Bounds: Exploring Borders and Scale in Contemporary British Environmental Poetry'. This thesis examines the significance of borders that are both culturally and ecologically meaningful, asking how these borders function in contemporary environmental poetry. It argues that such borders provide sites in which environmental poets can explore the interconnection of anthropocentric and ecocentric systems of value and work towards an understanding of human concerns at more-than-human, ecological scales.

The first chapter examines the significance of the borders of the 'dwelling space' in John Burnside's poetry. The following chapters move on to investigate the significance of more specific borders: coastlines and mountain ranges in Thomas A. Clark's recent collections, the river in Alice Oswald's *Dart* and the border between day and night in Richard Caddel's posthumously published *Writing in the Dark*.

The main focus of this thesis is creative practice. It investigates how poets writing out of very different traditions use borders that are culturally and ecologically meaningful as sites where they can develop their environmental poetics. The analysis of these poets' explorations of borders provides the basis for a comparative study of their creative practices and poetic techniques. In particular, this thesis argues that the act of 'beating the bounds' – the physical exploration of border spaces – is fundamental to all of the works discussed.

The final chapter, 'Lines of Flight', offers a point of connection between the critical and creative aspects of this project. It examines the relationship between critical research and creative practice, and charts some of the links between this thesis and the poetry collection *Lessons in Augury*.

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Introduction: Defining Boundaries and Shifting Scales

Dartmoor appears, from a distance, as a sprawl of browns, greens and greys, with few recognisable paths or landmarks. Tors change shape when seen from different angles, and the distances between them are difficult to judge. People often get turned around and lose their bearings. At first glance, the landscape seems more like a continuous mass than a place etched with borders and boundaries. This summer, on the August bank-holiday, the sky was the colour of the granite tors and, in the south, mist was blurring the line of the hills. There was a forecast of heavy rain and gale force winds; yet there I was, somewhere between Kennon Hill and Little Hound Tor, with eighty residents of Throwleigh Parish – all ages, complete with children and dogs – taking part in a six hour ‘beating the bounds’.

Beating the bounds is an old folk ritual (often annual but, in the case of Throwleigh, repeated once every seven years) in which people walk in procession around the boundaries of their parish, marking its limits by visiting memorable sites such as rivers, trees and stones¹. The origins of the ceremony are unknown, with some writers linking it to the Christian Rogation Day and others tracing it further back to Celtic and pagan fertility rituals². However, there is also a very practical rationale for the ceremony, suggested by Angus Winchester in *Discovering Parish Boundaries*: ‘before the mapping of the Six Inch Ordnance Survey sheets, boundaries were passed down by word of mouth and by ritual “beating of the bounds”’ (36). After the advent of official mapping, the ceremony almost universally ceased. Parish boundaries became less important than those of private property or designated state-owned sites.

The Ordnance Survey map of Dartmoor reflects this shift in priorities. The moor is defined by a thick orange margin, showing the extent of the land encompassed by the National Park. Footpaths are clearly visible, but by far the most prominent marks on the map are the bright red triangles alerting you to the boundary of the MOD’s Okehampton Range – a fitting reminder of the Ordnance Survey’s origins. Only when you look very closely do you notice a myriad of faint dotted lines threading through the uniform beige of the moor. Only when you follow these lines, do you notice the letters ‘BS’, ‘Boundary Stone’, peppering the map.

¹ Traditionally, the youngest members of the community would be ‘beaten’ at these sites, to ensure that they remained particularly ‘memorable’ for future generations. Fortunately, at Throwleigh, the stones were only marked by chiselling ‘TP’ into them. No children were harmed during the research of this thesis.

² See Clifford and King 34-5; and Sykes 68.

The first of Throwleigh's boundary stones was a roughly-shaped granite block about four feet tall, with 'TP' (Throwleigh Parish) carved in one side and 'ST' (South Tawton) in the other³. Against the backdrop of the moor it seemed, at first glance, totally arbitrary – a man-made border imposed on a landscape that seemed edgeless, continuous and vast. However, as we moved on to the next stone I noticed that we were following, exactly, the line of the valley – a line that led directly on to a distant tor. Elsewhere, our path took us to a natural well and a small copse of oak trees, before following the line of a brook flowing back towards fields and roads. As we walked I began to think of the moor less as a single landscape and more as a series of smaller regions, bounded by streams, rivers and the peaks of tors – regions that define the parish boundaries of the villages surrounding it. This way of looking at Dartmoor suddenly made so much more sense than the continuous beige mass presented by the Ordnance Survey. I began to see the moor for what it is: a collection of interconnected regions that have grown and developed in conjunction with specific communities over hundreds of years. The activity of beating the bounds may seem to be nothing more than a quaint folk-ritual, but it has a very real purpose – it allows communities like Throwleigh's to renew their physical, lived connection with their environment, through a focus on sites, landmarks and boundaries that have become meaningful to them over time.

Angus Winchester writes that 'today most people are only vaguely aware of the boundary of their local community and it is easy to forget how vitally important the knowledge of boundaries could be before the nineteenth century' (37). Yet, as my experience in Throwleigh suggests, the practice of mapping parish boundaries and beating the bounds has gone through a revival in recent decades. Despite the terrible weather, the stony paths through waist high gorse and the knee-deep mud, eighty people decided to spend their bank-holiday marking the boundary stones of their parish. I was told that in the warmer summer of 2005, as many as three hundred people turned out for the ceremony.

This revival is not just limited to Dartmoor. The organisation Common Ground has, for many years, been engaged in a national 'Parish Maps' project, which encourages communities to create maps of their local area, highlighting the aspects of their environment that are important to them personally, and marking the boundaries of the place that they think of as their home⁴. This act of tracing parish boundaries allows

³ For more information of the boundary stones of Dartmoor see Brewer *Dartmoor Boundary Stones, and Other Markers on and Around the Moor*.

⁴ See the Parish Maps project on the Common Ground website: <<http://www.England-in-particular.info/parishmaps/m-index.html>>

communities to learn about and revive their historical connection with their local environment. Sue Clifford, the Director of Common Ground, writes: ‘The ecclesiastical parish has been the measure of the English land-scape [sic] since Anglo-Saxon times. Boundaries, some dating back more than a thousand years, are often still traceable; here, history marches with nature and each is the richer for the discourse’. For an increasing number of people, beating the bounds provides an alternative means of mapping and understanding their environment that focuses on the interconnection of local culture and landscape.

This notion of beating the bounds as a form of local, experiential mapping links it to the concerns of recent psychogeographical and environmental literature. Non-fiction ‘New Nature Writing’, from Richard Mabey’s *The Unofficial Countryside* to Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts’ *Edgelands*, has explored the edges of towns and cities as sites of both ecological and cultural significance. In books such as Ian Sinclair’s *London Orbital* and Tim Robinson’s *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* the act of circumnavigating an area – beating the bounds – becomes a framework for writing and mapping that resists dominant discourses and centres of power.

Robinson, in particular, is highly critical of the centralised, monologic mapping techniques of the Ordnance Survey and sees his books as attempts to restore local knowledge and ownership of the landscape. In his essay ‘Islands and Images’, Robinson discusses the naturalised political and ideological decisions behind the supposedly objective Ordnance Survey maps of Aran:

Whereas the nineteenth-century surveyors meticulously recorded every crooked wall on the islands, they handled the placenames [sic] with a carelessness that reveals contempt, often mishearing them and even misplacing them on the map, and crudely transliterating them into English phonetics. To the colonial administration of that time rents and rates came before any other aspect of life, and the language of the peasant was nothing more than a subversive muttering behind the landlord’s back. (3)

This mishandling of place names in official maps contributed to the erosion of local knowledge of Aran throughout the twentieth-century. Robinson’s critique of the Ordnance Survey raises the important issue of mapping as an ideological act. This was particularly apparent in Western Ireland, where the mapping techniques of the Ordnance

Survey were intrinsically linked to British Imperialism and the alienation of Irish culture:

This historical insult stings the sharper in Aran because Irish is its first language, and although with each generation some of the placenames are forgotten or become incomprehensible, thousands of them still bring their poetry into everyday life. This made it intolerable that the barbarisms of the OS be perpetuated. (3)

While the Ordnance Survey map of Dartmoor may not carry the weight of colonial 'barbarism', it still betrays a similar process of overlooking and marginalising local knowledge. The map contains many fascinating place names, but there are also many omissions. While Beating the Bounds of Throwleigh Parish, we passed many landmarks – pools, brooks and copses – with local names that go unmentioned by the Ordnance Survey. Clearly no map can contain every local name of every landmark, but the fact that the Ordnance Survey is considered to be an official, comprehensive representation of landscape, means that any information omitted is in danger of being marginalised and, eventually, lost.

If, in the 1970's, Robinson was concerned with the effects of the Ordnance Survey on our relationship with our environment, subsequent mapping techniques can be seen to have caused a further deterioration of this relationship. In *The Wild Places* Robert Macfarlane discusses the effect of the road atlas, 'the commonest map of Britain', on our perception and understanding of our island home:

Considering the road atlas, an absence [...] becomes visible. The wild places are no longer marked. The fells, the caves, the tors, the woods, the moors, the river valleys and the marshes have all but disappeared. If they are shown at all, it is as background shadings or generic symbols. More usually, they have faded out altogether like old ink, become the suppressed memories of a more ancient archipelago. (10)

For Macfarlane, the road atlas, like all maps, exercises a 'distortive pressure upon the imagination' – it 'encourages us to imagine the land itself only as a context for motorised travel. It warps its readers away from the natural world' (10-11). Now, in the twenty-first-century, the monologic, deterministic view of our environment, exemplified

by our most common map, leaves little room for more nuanced, localised understandings of landscape.

Unlike abstract, modern mapping techniques (most commonly undertaken by a computer, using a satellite image), beating the bounds could be seen as a form of physical mapping – an ongoing process through which people might return to and develop an experiential, lived understanding of their environment over time. In books like Robinson's, Macfarlane's and Sinclair's, we see the very practices that were replaced by official mapping being revived as alternatives to received discourses and representations of place.

Significantly, the act of beating the bounds makes us aware of borders that are meaningful both culturally and ecologically – borders that mark the interconnection of culture and environment. The exploration of these kinds of borders has become an important and unexamined trend in a wide range of recent British environmental poetry. In this thesis I will examine the work of four contemporary poets, showing how explorations of borders that are both culturally and ecologically significant, are fundamental to their environmental poetics. I will begin in the territory of the beating the bounds ceremony, by discussing the importance of the borders of the 'dwelling space' in John Burnside's poetry. In the following chapters, I will move on to investigate the significance of more specific borders: coastlines and mountain ranges in Thomas A. Clark's recent collections, the river in Alice Oswald's *Dart* and the border between day and night in Richard Caddel's posthumously published *Writing in the Dark*.

I have chosen these poets principally for the range of borders that they explore, but also because, stylistically, they represent the diversity of recent environmental poetry in Britain. While John Burnside and Alice Oswald enjoy a wide readership and have received a great deal of critical attention, Thomas A. Clark and Richard Caddel are relatively unknown. One of the aims of this thesis is to redress this balance by exploring the themes and concerns that link these very different environmental poets.

I am not going to claim that a common focus on borders represents a definable tradition or movement; indeed, all of these poets can be seen to be writing out of very different poetic traditions. It is my intention to use this thesis as a comparative study, focusing on creative practice. I will ask how a diverse range of poets deal with very similar themes and concerns, and how they use their chosen borders and boundaries to develop their own particular environmental poetics. While I will discuss the poetic and philosophical influences that have shaped the work of these poets, I will also examine

the importance of the borders themselves in shaping the language and form of the poetry. How do coastlines, rivers, tree-lines, wastelands and the border between day and night function, not just as settings, but as active agents in environmental poetry? How do these borders function in the creation of different kinds of poetry, and what similarities or common themes can be traced throughout the explorations of these different borders and boundaries? I am particularly interested in examining the concept of beating the bounds in relation to these poets' works. While they do not literally engage in the *ceremony* of beating the bounds, all of these poets are concerned with the physical tracing and mapping of borders. My principle argument is that all of these poets use the exploration of borders – beating the bounds – as a creative framework for poetry that works towards a deeper understanding of the relationship between people and their environment.

I use the term 'deeper' because, in terms of environmental philosophy, it suggests links with 'deep ecology', a school of thought that identifies the dualisms of Western philosophy – such as Culture/Nature, Subject/Object, Self/World – as the foundation of our environmental crisis⁵. In place of this dualistic thought, deep ecologists promote the return to a primal identification of humans and the biosphere, accompanied by a move from a human-centred (anthropocentric) to a nature-centred (ecocentric) system of values. This advocacy of ecocentric values and rights has led to the development of strong connections between deep ecological philosophy and the activism of groups such as 'Friends of the Earth' and 'Earth First!' Not all of the poets discussed in this thesis necessarily align themselves with these kinds of political views. However, a concern that they all share with deep ecologists is the desire to challenge anthropocentrism and move towards a more ecocentric view of the relationship between humans and their environment.

The move from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism necessitates a fundamental shift in the way that we think about our environment. As Robin Eckersley writes, ecocentrism perceives the world as 'an intrinsically dynamic interconnected web [...] in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between [...] the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman' (49). All of the poets discussed in this thesis attempt, in different ways, to represent such a view of the world; but, in doing so, they face the problem of how to translate this ecocentric perspective into human terms and language.

⁵ For more information on Deep Ecology see Garrard 20-7; and Sessions ed *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*.

The difficulty of connecting human and ecological perspectives is discussed in a recent article by Timothy Clark, entitled ‘Derangements of Scale’. Clark argues that one of the most fundamental problems facing ecocritics and environmental writers is the difficulty of connecting global phenomena, such as climate change, to individual human activity. For Clark, this is a problem of *scale*:

With climate change [...] we have a map, its scale includes the whole earth but when it comes to relating the threat to daily questions of politics, ethics or specific interpretations of history, culture, literature, etc., the map is often almost mockingly useless. Policies and concepts relating to climate change invariably seem undermined or even derided by considerations of scale: a campaign for environmental reform in one country may be already effectively negated by the lack of such measures on the other side of the world. A long sought-for nature reserve, designed to protect a rare ecosystem, becomes, zooming out, a different place. (148-9)

The problem is that we are not aware of the ‘scale effects’ of our actions – we fail to link human and ecological scales. Faced with the problem of connecting human action with global phenomena, anthropocentric discourses, from politics and ethics to religion and history, are as inadequate and ‘deranged’ as government posters that connect the boiling of a kettle directly to an overheating planet (150).

It is not just the phenomena of climate change that has led writers to considerations of scale. In *The Wild Places* Robert Macfarlane describes how simply looking at a landscape for long enough can lead to a ‘swift vertiginous loss of scale’ (251). It is the shifting sand of Blakeney Point that leads him to think about scale, but, as he goes on to write, ‘this could happen anywhere’:

Stare for long enough at the surface of a granite boulder in the Mamores, and it will come to seem a mountain range itself. Several times in the course of my journeys, I found myself affected in this way [...], drawn into illusions in which my sense of scale was thrown, and it seemed that I might be able to enter a bird’s nest, or the bole of a tree, or pass into the curled lustrous chamber of a whelk. (251)

Looking closely at a sand dune, a rock or a shell, Macfarlane momentarily shifts his perspective from a human to a non-human scale.

This idea is explored in further detail by Kathleen Jamie in her recent book *Sightlines*. In the essay ‘Magpie Moth’ Jamie describes being on a moor, looking at an injured moth through a magnifying glass. She begins to see her immediate environment at moth-scale, where a small pool is a death-trap and the surface tension of a water droplet is strong enough to shackle a leg. When Jamie finally looks up at her wider surroundings, she experiences a very physical sensory confusion:

I stood up too quickly, swooned a little, because there was the wide moor, the loch, the breezy grasses reaching for miles, all scaling up to meet me. I’d been absorbed in the miniscule: a moth’s eye, a dab of lichen; been granted a glimpse into the countless millions of tiny processes and events that form the moor. Millions! (176)

The effect of shifting between human and non-human scales is simultaneously liberating and disorientating. Jamie’s close scrutiny allows her a glimpse of her environment in ecocentric terms, as an almost infinitely complex web of interconnected processes. At moth-scale this makes perfect sense, but returning to a human scale, this realisation results in a loss of her bearings. Experiences of the disorientating effects of scale punctuate *Sightlines*. Throughout her essays, Jamie describes the ‘unnerving scale’ of polar landscapes, the ‘pink landscape’ of organ tissue seen under a microscope and the ‘near mythic’ proportions of whales (2, 30, 230). In all these cases, the sheer scale of what is being described presents an impasse. We know that an iceberg really is that big and that our bodily organs really are that complex, but when we come face to face with such size or complexity we struggle to convert it to a scale that we can find meaningful. By drawing attention to such non-human, more-than-human scales, Jamie raises the important question of how to make these scales meaningful in human terms – how to relate the size, complexity and detail of our environment to our limited human experience of it.

In terms of scale, a ‘deeper’ understanding of our relationship with our environment would not mean the replacement of anthropocentrism with ecocentrism, but an attempt to find ways of thinking, writing and being that operate at both anthropocentric and ecocentric scales. For the poets that I will discuss in this thesis, borders function as sites of creativity and experimentation, where such ways of

thinking, writing and being can be explored. Just as the beating the bounds ceremony has been revived to challenge official representations of landscape, these poetic beatings of the bounds offer alternatives and challenges to the ‘derangement of scales’ apparent in dominant discourses relating to our environment.

While the challenge to anthropocentrism seen in environmental literature implies a questioning and, perhaps, rejection of the determining power of culture, such a challenge can be seen to be embedded in historical, political forces. It can be argued that, throughout a wide range of environmental literature, the challenge to anthropocentrism and the (often literal) attempt to move from ‘culture’ to ‘nature’ has been a specifically masculine pursuit. In an early review of *The Wild Places*, Kathleen Jamie highlights this and criticises Robert Macfarlane for writing from the perspective of a ‘lone enraptured male’, thus perpetuating an exclusively masculine view of our relationship with our environment. Jamie’s criticism raises the important issue of gender difference in environmental literature, which has historically been the preserve of solitary men exploring the ‘wilderness’, free from the perceived constraints of home, childcare and familial duties. In her discussion of ‘The Gannetry’ in *Sightlines*, Jamie highlights the fact that now her children are older she is able to travel further researching her book (73-89). As such, the geographical scope of *Sightlines* is significantly greater than the more home-bound *Findings*, written when her children were younger and required greater attention. Through observations and reflections such as this, Jamie’s work offers an important alternative to the masculine narratives and personas that have become naturalised in contemporary environmental writing.

The tradition of masculine environmental writing is clearly continued in the work of John Burnside and Thomas A. Clark, both of whom write almost exclusively from the perspective of a solitary man, exploring the edges of his environment, far from other people (especially his family). Indeed, as I will discuss in chapter one, for Burnside in particular, the exploration of border spaces is intrinsically connected to his writing on masculinity. In contrast to Burnside’s and Clark’s apparent masculine solitude, Alice Oswald’s focus on communality in *Dart* could, perhaps, be read in terms of an alternative, female environmental poetics. However, in the context of this thesis, I argue that this has more to do with the nature of her subject, the river Dart (a border that runs through the centre of a community), than her gender. In the final chapter it will be apparent that Richard Caddel offers an interesting alternative to the figure of the ‘lone enraptured male’, as he focuses on his wife, home, family and friends throughout *Writing in the Dark*. The issue of gender difference in environmental poetics is a

complex and nuanced subject, beyond the remit of this thesis, but which, nonetheless, deserves acknowledgement in any study of these texts.

Throughout this thesis I group the work of Burnside, Clark, Oswald and Caddel under the term 'environmental poetry'. As alternatives, I find 'ecopoetics' too specific to describe such a range of poetic techniques⁶, and 'nature poetry' too reliant on the problematic concept of 'nature' defined in opposition to human culture⁷. The term 'environment', meanwhile, is very useful for thinking about the relationship between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, human and more-than-human scales.

In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate sees it as problematic that 'environment', stemming from 'environ', refers to the world 'around us': 'The world *around us*: anthropocentrism, the valuation of nature only insofar as it radiates out from humankind, remains a given' (138). I agree with Bate to an extent: if we talk about 'our environment', we are viewing the world in terms of the self; but inherent within the term is also the capacity for viewing the self in terms of the world. Bate's criticism does not take into account alternative meanings of 'environment', such as the physical conditions of a person, community or thing, and, in scientific terms, the external conditions affecting the life of a plant or animal⁸. If we think about these definitions, it becomes clear that while we may decide what area of the biosphere we call our 'environment', the term still allows for the fact that the physical conditions of that area have a very real effect on how we live, work and develop. Inherent in the term 'environment' is the recognition of both human and non-human agency; as such, thinking about our environment offers the potential for moving between anthropocentric and ecocentric scales of action and agency. 'Environmental Poetry' could, therefore, be defined as poetry that explores the concept of 'our environment' and the interconnection of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism that this term suggests.

Furthermore, if 'environment' is commonly viewed as an anthropocentric term, this is not necessarily a problem. The inherent anthropocentrism of discourses relating to our environment must be openly acknowledged before they can be broken down. The real problem for environmental poetry may, in fact, be that with our increased knowledge of the interconnectedness of organisms, habitats and climate systems, the term 'environment' has become too *ecocentric*. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Timothy Clark notes that we have reached a stage

⁶ I use Jonathan Bate's definition of ecopoetics as a 'making of the home' to discuss John Burnside's work, but this definition does not adequately describe the overall aims or practices of the other poets.

⁷ This critique of 'nature' is explored in detail by Kate Soper in *What is Nature?* and Timothy Morton in *Ecology Without Nature*.

⁸ These are two of several definitions given by the *OED*.

where ‘the “environment”, after all, is, ultimately, “everything”’ (203). He goes on to suggest that ‘the unprecedented challenge of things like climate change [...] may be the need, literally, to think everything, even to think everything at once’ (203).

Of course, ‘thinking everything’ is impossible, and this impossibility has led various critics to view the attempt to represent more-than-human, ecocentric thought as a project destined for failure. In ‘Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis’, Kate Rigby suggests that ‘ecopoetics’⁹ can only be successful insofar as it functions as a ‘negative poetics’: ‘Only to the extent that the work of art is self-cancelling, acknowledging in some way its inevitable failure to adequately mediate the voice of nature, can it point us to that which lies beyond its own enframing’ (437). Timothy Morton draws on Rigby’s work in *Ecology Without Nature*, writing that ‘all forms of positive ecological poetry are compromised by setting up the idea of nature “over there”’ (160). According to Morton, any kind of writing that attempts to represent the ‘real world’ is trapped into either acknowledging its failure or labouring under the delusion that it actually can join word and world¹⁰. Morton’s ‘Object Oriented’ philosophy makes little distinction between differences of style, mode or form; all books are constrained by their materiality. This means that, while he is extremely attentive to the form of a Pink Floyd LP, a *Lord of the Rings* DVD or a piece of modern art, he lumps poetry, fiction, memoir and travelogue all under the term ‘reality writing’. Similarly, he uses the terms ‘ecological poetry’, ‘environmental writing’, ‘nature writing’ and ‘ecomimesis’ interchangeably throughout *Ecology Without Nature*. This is a limiting critical position for discussing contemporary environmental poetry. Morton bases his arguments primarily on readings of eighteenth and nineteenth century verse. The only references to post-1900 poetry in his book are one poem by Edward Thomas, one by Denise Levertov and a derisory footnote that actually relates to Ted Hughes’ prose.

Any reading of *contemporary* environmental poetry shows that ‘positive’ poetics function in much more complex ways than Morton allows for. The poets that I will discuss in this thesis acknowledge that language and thought are necessarily limited and anthropocentric, but they still present their poetry as a means of connecting human experience with ecocentric systems of thought and being, operating at more-than-human scales. They show a critical, self-reflexive awareness of the limits of language and the materiality of their chosen form, but they do not allow this to become the sole focus of

⁹ Here, Rigby is using ‘ecopoetics’ as a very broad term, not with the specific meaning that Bate attributes to it.

¹⁰ See *Ecology Without Nature* 123-35.

their work. Such awareness provides the basis for a *critically positive* rather than a negative poetics. To return to Clark's statement, these poets acknowledge that poetic language cannot represent 'everything', still less 'everything at once', but this does not mean that it can't afford us *deeper* understandings of our relationship to the 'everything' of our environment – an understanding that can be further deepened over time.

Morton's rejection of positive poetics develops out of his attempts to work through the logical ramifications of a poststructuralist view of language, based on the fundamental 'gap' between word and world. Where Morton takes this poststructuralist view of language as the basis of his readings of environmental writing, I will examine an alternative contemporary theory – Critical Realism – that provides a discourse through which the achievements of positive environmental poetics can be acknowledged and understood.

Critical Realism is, very broadly speaking, a theory of the relationship of knowledge to reality, which positions itself between poststructuralist/postmodern critiques of positivism and realist critiques of extreme relativism. Originally developing out of the scientific philosophy of Roy Bhaskar, Critical Realism has since been championed, in books such as *After Postmodernism*, as an alternative to the philosophical impasses of poststructuralism and postmodernism. While Critical Realism takes on board certain elements of relativist thinking, it is fundamentally critical of the fact that extreme relativism 'is not able to explain why it is the case that science continues to produce useful knowledge' (Potter and López 11). In its original form, Critical Realism describes the balancing act that all scientists must perform between a necessary reliance on empirical knowledge and a necessary acceptance of the relativist view that all knowledge is, to a certain extent, culturally constructed¹¹. A scientist knows that no experiment can *absolutely* reflect conditions as they are in the real world, therefore no knowledge can be unconditionally verified. However, in spite of this, knowledge that has achieved a high enough probability of proof must be accepted as fact if science is to develop. Critical Realism charts a middle-ground between positivism and extreme relativism, providing an account of the *positive* production of knowledge that occurs in both science and everyday life. In *After Postmodernism*, Gary Potter and José López write that 'Critical Realism puts forward epistemological caution with respect to scientific knowledge, as opposed to a self-defeating relativist scepticism' (9).

¹¹ For a good introduction to Critical Realism as it applies to science see Archer, et al, eds *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*.

The importance of Critical Realism's philosophy of knowledge production becomes particularly apparent when we consider climate change. Discussing the relationship of Critical Realism to environmental concerns, Potter and López write:

Perhaps one of the most ironic and far reaching developments of the end of the twentieth century was the fact that the discovery of the problem of 'environmental' and 'ecological' degradation coincided, more or less, with the sustained questioning – and indeed some would say undermining – of science's explanatory power. (131)

The very real problem of climate change makes it all the more important to move beyond 'self-defeating relativist scepticism' and engage in discourses that are cautious about the constructed elements of knowledge, but that also fundamentally allow for the fact that science can (and does) construct knowledge that gives us a deeper understanding of the complex realities of the world.

Since Critical Realism developed out of a critique within the philosophy of science, it may seem that it has little to say about literature or art. However, Potter and López suggest that, 'if Critical Realism transforms our understanding of science and thus gives us some guidelines for future practice the same is true for aesthetics or cultural analysis' (181). *After Postmodernism* includes essays that analyse novels, films and literary theory in light of Critical Realist philosophy. I will build on this scholarship by arguing that Critical Realist theories of the positive production of knowledge provide an important philosophical framework for reading contemporary environmental poetry – poetry that acknowledges the limitations of anthropocentric language, but still views it as a viable (and necessary) means of communicating complex ecocentric realities.

Critical Realist theories of the production of knowledge are founded on the premise that, while 'knowledge is culturally and historically situated', we can, and do, understand the world around us (Potter and López 9). Furthermore, we can, and do, communicate this knowledge to one another and make decisions that increase (or decrease) our knowledge. For Potter and López:

we do so both scientifically and in everyday life. If we could not we would not be very frequently successful in even our most mundane activities. Science, in one sense at least, is merely a refinement of what we do in the practical functioning of everyday life. However it is a refinement! And what Critical

Realism as a philosophy does is to establish the basis of the *possibility* of this refinement. (9)

I believe that environmental poetry can be seen as a similar 'refinement'. Just as scientific knowledge can be realistically proven by its track record of successes throughout human history, the idea that poetic language can provide us with a deeper understanding of our environment has a realistic basis in the fact that poetry has, throughout history, been successful in communicating complex meaning to its readership. If we can use language to communicate the realities of day-to-day interactions with our environment, then we can use it, in a refined form, to communicate a deeper understanding of these realities. While no contemporary environmental poets would label themselves 'Critical Realist', Critical Realist theories of knowledge production can, nonetheless, be seen to provide a philosophical basis for the *possibility* of a positive environmental poetics.

Critical Realism provides a discourse with the critical articulacy to do justice to the complex attitudes towards language that can be seen in contemporary environmental poetry. A Critical Realist view of language acknowledges that words can never *absolutely* reflect the world, but this does not mean that they bear no relation to their subject. Poetry cannot give us a total understanding of the ecological complexity of our environment, but it can allow us to increase our knowledge of this complexity. In terms of exploring connections between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, a Critical Realist perspective would recognise that the limited scale of anthropocentric language and thought will never be able to fully represent the far more complex scales of ecocentrism, but it would still allow for the possibility of making positive progress in this effort.

Significantly for this thesis, Critical Realism provides a new theoretical framework for discussing the themes of faith, mysticism and uncertainty that appear in all of the poetry under discussion. The influence of shamanism can be seen in Burnside's transformation poems, while his more overtly philosophical works, such as 'Responses to Augustine of Hippo', show a direct engagement with the Christian Mystical tradition. Clark combines the aphoristic statements of Zen Buddhism with an interest in animism in his short poetry, while Oswald mixes Aboriginal beliefs, Classical paganism and Celtic folklore in her 'songline' of the river Dart. Caddel may write from the perspective of an atheist, but his late poetry shows a strong concern for issues of spirituality, humility and the articulation of his own 'dark faith'. All of these poets draw on pre-existent mystical, spiritual traditions and adapt them to engage with

contemporary environmental, ecological concerns. In these poets' works we see philosophical and poetic techniques that were traditionally used for contemplation of the divine being used as a means of engaging with more-than-human, ecocentric perspectives of the world. The mystical attempt to engage in an intuitive, experiential understanding of what cannot be absolutely *known* is fundamental to all of these poets' explorations of their environments. As I will show, Critical Realism provides the necessary contemporary theoretical tools for discussing such an attempt.

Throughout this thesis, I will argue that Critical Realist attitudes towards the relationship of language and reality can be read in the diverse poetics of Burnside, Clark, Oswald and Caddel. In particular, I will argue that these attitudes towards poetic language develop in conjunction with the exploration of border spaces.

In 'Truth in Fiction, Science and Criticism', Garry Potter writes that borders are central to the generation of meaning in both science and literature:

Reality in one sense exists as an unbounded continuum; yet our knowledge of it postulates divisions and boundaries. [...] What, on some ontological levels, are simply different combinations of chemicals, molecular events or probabilities of particles, existing and interacting in a continuum of relative stability and constant change, are on an epistemological level real divisions. Yes, it is we who endow these divisions with significance but yet this is not arbitrary. It is a combination of how *the world is* and *how we are*. (189)

Potter acknowledges that many divisions and boundaries that we use to categorise and make sense of the world are firmly based in anthropocentric discourses and scales of thought. Yet, there are certain borders that, in Potter's words, 'cut nature at its joints' and are meaningful at both human and more-than-human scales: 'The border between a shore and a lake must be meaningful to us. There are myriad divisions in nature, some of which we do not notice [...]. But the shoreline demands we attach significance to it. It demands this because of our capacities, our interests, our nature' (189). Shorelines are culturally meaningful in a number of ways, but they are also meaningful to us, defined at an ecological scale, as organisms limited by the capacities of our land-dwelling bodies. The shoreline is a site where the relationship of people and their environment can be seen in both anthropocentric and ecocentric terms. As such, borders like the shoreline become important sites for exploring Critical Realist theories of how human

discourses such as science and literature can work towards deeper understandings of more-than-human reality.

All of the poets that I have chosen to write about in this thesis explore borders that are meaningful anthropocentrically and ecocentrically, at both human and more-than-human scales. Burnside's borders of the dwelling space may seem to be purely anthropocentric, but they are invariably found, like the boundaries of Throwleigh Parish, at sites that are also meaningful ecocentrically – the edges of woods, along streams and in wastelands surrounding towns. In a far more obvious way, Clark's coastlines and mountain ranges, Oswald's river and Caddel's border between day and night are all boundaries that 'cut nature at its joints'. They are meaningful to us ecologically, as diurnal, land-dwelling creatures with bodies unsuited for harsh conditions; and they are also meaningful for numerous other plants and animals that inhabit our environment. Borders such as these are meaningful at a range of different human, non-human and more-than-human scales. As such, they are the perfect sites for these poets to work towards a deeper understanding of our relationship with our environment, and to explore the connections between anthropocentric and ecocentric systems of thought and being.

**‘Between home and the rest of the world’: The Borders of the Dwelling Space
in John Burnside’s Poetry.**

Over the course of the last two decades John Burnside has established himself as one of the foremost advocates and practitioners of British environmental poetry. His twelve published collections engage with the recurring themes of dwelling, belonging and exile – themes that are closely tied to his environmental concerns. In his essay ‘A Science of Belonging: Poetry as Ecology’ he writes:

what interests me about poetry and ecology is that, together, they make up a science of belonging, a discipline by which we may both describe and celebrate the “everything that is the case” of the world, and so become worthy participants in a natural history. (92)

In this chapter I will investigate how Burnside attempts to ‘describe and celebrate the “everything that is the case” of the world’ through his repeated explorations of the borders of the dwelling space – the space between the known and unknown, belonging and exile. I hope to prove that this poetic beating of the bounds is fundamental to Burnside’s ongoing poetic project. Indeed, I will examine how the act of beating the bounds connects many of the wider themes of Burnside’s poetry to his environmental concerns. Since the exploration of borders and boundaries occurs in all of Burnside’s collections to date, I will take my examples from across his oeuvre. Furthermore, I will suggest that the act of repeating and revisiting the same themes throughout the last twenty years is central to the unique poetics that Burnside has developed.

The first question that must be asked is what exactly Burnside means by the ‘everything that is the case’ of the world. The phrase is taken from the opening of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: ‘The world is everything that is the case’ (5 [pt. 1]). Wittgenstein uses this proposition as the starting point for his discussion of logic and his examination of the limits of what it is possible for us to know and speak about. The *Tractatus* argues for the connection of thought and language:

- 4 A thought is a proposition with a sense.
- 4.001 The totality of propositions is language. (19)

In Wittgenstein's view, the totality of what can be thought is what can be expressed through the logic of language. Therefore, it is senseless for philosophy to engage in anything that cannot be expressed through logical language. For Wittgenstein, questions of ethics, aesthetics and faith – the 'problems of life' – are beyond the remit of philosophical thought (73 [pt. 6, no. 52]). This leads to the famous conclusion of the *Tractatus*: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (74 [pt. 7]).

Burnside's poetry challenges Wittgenstein's conclusion by offering an alternative exploration of the 'everything that is the case' of the world. As this chapter will discuss, Burnside's poetry engages directly with issues such as mysticism, faith and even magic. In his attempt to 'describe and celebrate the "everything that is the case" of the world', Burnside departs from Wittgenstein's strictly logical approach, to engage with alternative, non-rational philosophies that allow him to speak about subjects that Wittgenstein would 'pass over in silence'. For Burnside, an understanding of the 'everything that is the case' of the world necessitates a linguistic, poetic engagement with the non-human, more-than-human scales of thought and being that we encounter in our environments every day.

In an article on the American poet Allison Funk, Burnside refers to the 'everything that is the case' of the world by another name: 'the quotidian'; a term he derives from Paul Eluard's concept of *l'autremonde* and which he describes as 'the actual unfolding of the world around us' that takes place behind the experienced, known world of the 'banal' ('Travelling into the Quotidian' 64). For Burnside 'the quotidian is the lyric poet's holy grail' and yet 'it is always happening – this kingdom-at-hand, this otherworld – and the self that goes with it, the "what-I-would-be" is always there' (64, 66). In Burnside's poetry, the quotidian represents a complex, ecological vision of the relationship between the self and its environment – a view of the world that exists beyond the limits of 'taken-for-granted' anthropocentric discourses (61). Access to the quotidian would afford the potential for a deeper understanding of the self in ecological, more-than-human terms, at the scale of the 'everything that is the case' of the world.

Burnside's poetry can be read as a catalogue of half-seen, half-heard encounters with the quotidian; but, importantly, he addresses the difficulty of translating these encounters into terms that we can understand. In the poem 'Yird', from the sequence 'By Pittenweem', Burnside writes:

There was something I heard in the wind,
geese, or the call of a vixen,

or something else, beyond vocabulary (*Gift Songs* 59)

The poet knows that something is there, but ‘nothing will come in a form I could recognise’ and he is left with ‘only the other world / unending, yet lost throughout time’ (59). While Burnside addresses the fundamental problem of how to gain access to the quotidian, he is also concerned with how to translate his glimpses of it into a recognisable, meaningful form.

In another sequence from *Gift Songs*, ‘Le Croisic’, Burnside describes what he calls ‘the hard quotidian’:

pit-shafts and docks, harbours and open meadows,
the gap in the hedge, the whisper of running water (73)

These are all border spaces – coastlines, tunnels into the earth, hedges, rivers and the old common land of meadows. When faced with the problem of representing the quotidian, Burnside begins by describing what is solid or ‘hard’, the spaces that we immediately recognise as borders or thresholds, the lines that, in Gary Potter’s words ‘cut nature at its joints’. For Burnside, if we are to understand our relationship to the ‘everything that is the case’ of the world, we need to turn our focus to the edges of the dwelling space and the known, human world. In Burnside’s poetry, these border spaces provide a kind of measure by which human conceptions of the self and the dwelling space can be explored at non-human and more-than human scales.

Importantly, for Burnside, the attempt to gain knowledge of the quotidian requires an overhaul of our old systems of thought and an active engagement with alternative ways of understanding the world. In ‘A Science of Belonging’ he writes: ‘At the beginning of the new century, I am interested in finding what Heidegger called a new way of thinking’ (93). I will examine how Burnside’s recurring explorations of the borders of the dwelling space become a means of engaging with a ‘new way of thinking’. I will also ask precisely what type of thinking this might be.

*

Any reading of contemporary environmental poetry that focuses on the concept of dwelling must necessarily touch on the work of Jonathan Bate. Indeed, since 2002, Bate has championed Burnside’s poetry. Reviewing *The Light Trap* in *The Guardian*, he

claimed that Burnside should be seen as one of the most important environmental poets of the twenty-first century:

Though too subtle a book to be described as a manifesto, it stakes out the ground for a “green poetry” that will be as essential to our century as [Wallace] Steven’s luminous meditations were to the last. (‘Eco laurels’)

It is of little surprise that Bate should feel this way. Burnside’s ‘science of belonging’ is precisely the kind of poetic philosophy that Bate promoted in *The Song of the Earth*, published two years prior to the *Guardian* review. In this book, Bate offers a re-reading of the Romantic tradition in light of new environmental concerns and the term ‘ecopoetics’. Following Martin Heidegger’s writings on poetry and dwelling, particularly in relation to the quote ascribed to Hölderlin, ‘poetically man dwells’, Bate suggests that poetry can become a means of connecting ourselves to our environment, of ‘making’ our ‘home’ in the world. He writes: ‘I have redescribed this broadly conceived Romanticism as an ‘ecopoetic’, a *poesis* (Greek ‘making’) of the *oikos* (Greek ‘home’ or ‘dwelling-place’)’ (245).

Almost all of Burnside’s poetry can be read in the context of this act of ‘making’ the ‘home’. Analyses of Burnside’s work in relation to Bate’s ecopoetics have already been made in various articles and papers¹². My analysis will add to this scholarship by suggesting how Burnside’s poetry develops Bate’s concept of ecopoetics and overcomes some of the problems that are raised in the final chapter of *The Song of the Earth*.

At the end of his book, Bate is still troubled by what he perceives to be a binding dualism governing our relationship with our environment and, subsequently, the way that we may conceive of ecopoetry:

The poetic is ontologically double because it may be thought of as ecological in two senses: it is either (both?) a language (*logos*) that restores us to our home (*oikos*) or (and?) a melancholy recognizing that our only home (*oikos*) is language (*logos*). (281)

¹² See *Agenda* 45.4/46.1 *Dwelling Spaces: An Appreciation of John Burnside* (2011); Bristow ‘Phenomenology, History, Biosemiotics: Heideggerian and Batesonian Poetics in John Burnside’s Post-Romantic Process Ecology’; and Hopkins ‘In the Green Team’.

I would like to focus on the tentatively parenthesised and question-marked words ‘both’ and ‘and’ in this sentence. Without them, Bate’s eco-poetics remains trapped in what he calls a Cartesian dualism – *either* we are physical beings that dwell in the world and are one with our environment, *or* we are thinking beings and our only home is our man-made language. If, however, we replace ‘either/or’ with ‘both/and’, then a middle ground opens up, allowing for a much more fluid concept of what it means to dwell in the world and of the relationship between our thoughts and our physical interactions with our environment. While Bate seems uncertain as to whether the ‘both/and’ formulation is possible, for Burnside, this essentially paradoxical view forms the basis of his poetics and philosophy of dwelling. In ‘By Pittenweem’ he describes ‘home’ as:

the house behind the houses in their dreams,
the house of cold, the rooms of fern and bone,
the refuge in a squall, the proof in storms (*Gift Songs* 63)

This is certainly a fluid notion of ‘home’. It is something imagined, abstracted even from dreams, but also a physical ‘refuge in a squall’. It occupies both an internal and external space; it can be made of ‘fern’ from the outside world, but also the ‘bone’ of our bodies. It is a place seemingly founded on the confounding of dualisms.

In an interview with Attila Dósa, Burnside discusses his attitude towards dualistic thought, saying, ‘I wanted to replace the idea of duality, which suggests two separate things, with the idea of the binary, where two things complement each other’ (‘Poets and Other Animals’ 12). If we examine this view in light of Bate’s statement on eco-poetry, it raises some important questions: how can the two sides of Bate’s dualism ‘complement’ each other? How can poetry *both* restore us to our home – enable us to dwell in the world – *and* recognise that our only home is in language – that our knowledge of the world is fundamentally limited? Or to put it another way, how can we dwell properly in a world that we can never fully know or understand?

This seems like an impossible paradox; but only if we assume that the aim of eco-poetry is indeed ‘ontological’ – to provide us with an absolute understanding of the world. For Burnside, eco-poetry has a very different function. His poetry recognises the limits of our knowledge and the impossibility of an absolute state of dwelling; but it also suggests that this does not mean categorically that ‘our only home is in language’. Rather, we can make tentative steps towards a deeper understanding of how we dwell in the world through poetry that examines how we ‘make’ our ‘homes’. Burnside’s

response to perceived dualisms of ecopoetics is Critical Realist, charting a middle ground between the relativist view that ‘our only home is in language’ and the positivist belief that poetry ‘restores us to our home’.

To find a way through these dualisms and more deeply explore the making of the home, Burnside shifts his focus from the centre of the dwelling space to its outer edges – from the hearth to the hallway, from a place of safety, warmth and light to the darkened window, the garden hedge, the edge of the woods. These borders and boundaries are fundamental to Burnside’s ecopoetics; they are spaces of mystery, uncertainty and creative potential, spaces that are endlessly fascinating and alluring. As he writes in ‘Blackbird’, out of all the childhood stories we are told ‘isn’t the best the one where the children / find a borderline between their mother’s world // and somewhere else?’ (*Light Trap* 69).

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Throughout Burnside’s poetry, borders are presented as being fundamental to defining how we think about our place in the world. In ‘Unwittingly’, he writes: ‘I’ve visited the place / where thought begins’ (*Normal Skin* 31). This place is always a borderland, whether an alley ‘to nothing // but nettles / and broken walls’, a ‘seaside town’ or ‘the corner of some junkyard’ (31). The specific places are interchangeable, what matters are their situations on the boundaries of human dwellings, at the edges of the safe and the known. It is in such places that we leave behind our preconceptions and may, as the title suggests, unwittingly stumble upon new ways of thinking about our place in the world. Although there are variations in details and location, these borders are described as ‘always the same lit space’ (31). Andy Brown has identified this ‘lit space’ as a recurring trope in Burnside’s poetry, describing it as ‘the gap [...] between the self and other; between internal and external; between imagination and reality; between nature and culture’ (‘Finding the Lit Space’ 109). I would like to add to this by emphasising that the ‘lit space’ is a gap, but *also* a point of connection. It is a border that, like all the borders in Burnside’s poetry, is both a barrier and a crossing. The ‘lit space’ functions as a binary (as opposed to a dualism) of self and other, culture and nature, knowledge and uncertainty, light and darkness – at once driving the dark away, whilst also, to a certain extent, allowing it to encroach upon the dwelling space. This permeability is central to its function. It allows anyone who stumbles upon the lit space a glimpse of the quotidian – the world outside of the bounds of the dwelling space and of their

prescribed systems of thought. These glimpses are, for Burnside, where our most valuable knowledge of the world comes from; as he writes later in ‘Unwittingly’:

what we learn in the dark
remains all our lives,
a noise like the sea, displacing the day’s
pale knowledge (31)

The borders of ‘Unwittingly’ (and, indeed, the borders that recur throughout Burnside’s poetry) are sites where he is able to engage with a ‘new way of thinking’ and explore alternatives to dominant rationalist philosophies.

In particular, these borders are sites where Burnside can challenge the traditional anthropocentric view of the self as an individual unity, defined in opposition to the world, and explore the more ecological view of the interconnection of self and environment. In the first section of ‘By Pittenweem’ entitled ‘Home’, Burnside describes himself rebuilding the boundaries of his garden in spring:

a cold blade clenched in my fist

or a length of twine,
my body mapped and measured by the heft

of work that must be done (*Gift Songs* 57)

Here the poet is not only marking the limits of his dwelling, but also of his self. In this poem, the repeated, yearly activity of attending to his borders serves as a personal beating the bounds ceremony. Burnside’s beating the bounds allows him to redefine his dwelling space in terms of his own desires and needs (literally reshaping its boundaries), but it also allows for his sense of self to be redefined and ‘mapped’ in relation to his environment. As he defines his environment anthropocentrically, so he becomes defined ecocentrically.

For Burnside, the breakdown of the perceived borders between self and environment is heightened by the fact that the action takes place during the changing of the seasons – the first day of spring. In ‘Poetry and a Sense of Place’ he writes about the importance of these transitional times of the year: ‘They are, in our experience, the

moments when the person is susceptible to change, where his being is raw, as it were, where identity is less fixed, more open to possibility' (202). An earlier poem, 'Halloween' recounts the poet beating the bounds of his parish on this turning point in the pagan calendar, walking 'the boundaries of ice and bone' (*Myth of the Twin* 1). As he does so, he sees, beyond the village boundary, 'other versions of myself, / familiar and strange, and swaddled in their time' (1). Such visions of other selves and twins pervade Burnside's poetry, from *The Myth of the Twin* up to his recent collection, *The Hunt in the Forest*¹³. These figures always appear at the borders of the dwelling space, at the edge of the safe, known world, bringing with them connotations of haunting and the gothic concept of the doppelgänger. These twins or other selves inhabit Burnside's quotidian and are central to his view that the self is fixed neither spatially nor temporally. Burnside's poetry suggests that the self not only transcends the Cartesian 'shell' of the body to become defined alongside its environment, but that it exists simultaneously at different times, in different potential situations. On the borders, people catch glimpses of other potential lives that they might have led and come to define themselves less by what or where they *are*, and more by what or where they *might be* or *might have been*. Burnside writes that one of the main purposes of the lyric poem is 'to suggest [...] a sense of the continuum of being' ('Poetry and a Sense of Place' 213). While celebrating the 'everything that is the case' of his environment, his poetry also explores the potential 'everything that is the case' of the self.

John Lucas notes that this focus on potentiality is reflected in the grammatical and syntactic structure of Burnside's verse. Lucas highlights 'a characteristic procedure of Burnside's':

the use of the connectives 'and'/'or' to create a kind of paratactic fusion so that, by implication or by what we may infer, everything is potentially linked to everything else, and a world we are accustomed to experiencing as collocations of disparate fragments can be set against and (who knows?) displaced by one of coherence or which anyway is suggestive of it. (29)

This 'characteristic procedure' is central to Burnside's attempts to represent the 'everything that is the case' of the quotidian. His use of language reflects the potential interconnection of selves and 'other selves', human and non-human forms, that take

¹³ This was the most recent collection to have been published at the time of writing. Similar themes can be seen in *Black Cat Bone* (2011) but are not dealt with here.

place when we view our relationship with our environment at the ecological scales of the quotidian.

Just as important as the encounters with twins or other selves are the numerous instances of animal encounters that occur in Burnside's poetry. In 'Geese' the poet recalls seeing an enormous flock of geese while driving to work. The setting is another border space – a drive along the coast, between towns, 'passing the ferry / or slowing among the fields / of water and reeds' (*Asylum Dance* 9). When the poet sees the geese he gets out of the car and has a sudden, unexpected physical reaction:

I parked the car
and stepped out
to the rush of it:
a rhythm I had waited years
to feel in the meat of my spine
and the bones of my face (11)

He feels, for a moment, what he imagines the geese feel; he is reconnected with one of our most primal feelings, experiencing the idea of 'home' at an instinctive, physical level:

homing
in the purer urgency
of elsewhere
which is nothing like the mind's
intended space
but how the flesh belongs (11)

'Homing', or belonging, is shown here to have less to do with the way that we *think* of ourselves than the way we *feel* ourselves, physically, as animals in the world. In Burnside's poetry the concepts of home and belonging come to transcend perceived human/non-human dualisms. This moment of physical connection with the geese allows Burnside to experience his sense of self in non-human and more-than-human terms.

Writing about the importance of 'animal encounters' in his essay 'Mind the Gap: On Reading American Poetry', Burnside highlights the creative potential afforded by such encounters:

As human creatures, unable to bear very much reality, we feel wonder, awe and panic when space opens for a moment and, in meeting with an animal [...] we see into the fabric of the world itself; a vision that both reaffirms the continuity of that world and leaves us doubtful of our own place in it, other than as creatures to be transformed into new lives, new forms. (63)

Animal encounters offer an opportunity to view the world in terms of interconnectedness and potentiality. Burnside suggests that by travelling to the edges of the human dwelling space and attempting to experience the non-human world on its own terms, we can unsettle stable notions of human selfhood and gain insights into alternative ways of being in the world.

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If everything is potentially interconnected at the ecological scales of the quotidian, then everything could also be seen to have the capacity to change its form. The themes of transformation and metamorphosis are, therefore, central to Burnside's poetics and his attempts to represent the 'everything that is the case' of the world. In 'Poetry and a Sense of Place', Burnside discusses the importance of the Celtic myth of *idir eathara*, 'a boundary that is neither one place nor another', to his attempts to find a 'new way of thinking' about the relationship between humans, animals and their environment:

this space is the locus of transformations: humans become birds, or animals, the old are rejuvenated, the human and faerie are indistinguishable. The gap is also the space in which several versions of a place, or person, can exist simultaneously [...]. In other words, this magical space is where identity unfolds, and is capable of transformation. It is the boundary between one state and another, where magic is possible. (202)

The borders in Burnside's poetry could all potentially be *idir eathara* – a place where stable, rational systems of thought break down and are replaced by 'magic', 'transformation' and alternative ways of understanding the world.

Burnside explores these ideas in 'A Swimming Lesson', where a river serves as the magical border *idir eathara*:

Maybe it's luck, or a talent for going naked
that lets one body mingle with the stream
till fingers and eyes and even lungs
are water. Maybe it's a gift
for transformation,
changing from child to swan at the river's edge,
from swan to fish, from fish to waterweed.
And maybe it's a pledge to gravity
that keeps another wedded to the earth,
the way I would dive to prove the riverbed
before I could swim midstream,
probing the mud with my fingers, clawing up handfuls
of pebbles and silt, and drowned bodies
eased from their bones
– I had to know that solid ground was there,
while she was drifting, merging with the tide,
taking a form from the water and making it hers,
accepting its favours, repaying the debt in kind. (*Swimming in the Flood* 26)

For the boy in this poem, the river is a border to be negotiated, lying both at the edge of town in 'coal-black woods beyond the railway yards' and at the edge of his known world (26). It is an unfamiliar and magical space that forces him to probe and grasp for meaning and stability. The poem is concerned with the traditional lyric theme of desire, but, rather than a desire for the girl herself, the boy desires the strange understanding of the world that the girl personifies. The boy longs to be able to swim like the girl, who has the 'gift for transformation'; but in order to do so, he must renege on his 'pledge to gravity' and his current modes of thinking about the world.

The girl embodies an ecological, interconnected view of the self. Through swimming, she is able to experience herself as an animal (a swan, then a fish), a plant (waterweed) and ultimately the water that makes up her environment. By literally moving through the 'continuum of being' in this way, she acquires a physical, embodied knowledge of the 'everything that is the case' of the world.

While invoking the themes of magic and metamorphosis, Burnside also draws on alternative modern philosophies that address the relationship of the self and its

environment; in particular the work of the early-twentieth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson uses the example of learning to swim to illustrate his alternative theory of the ways in which we acquire knowledge of our environment. His work critiques rationalist philosophy and proposes a view of knowledge acquisition that takes into account our physical interactions with the world. In a famous example of the limits of a rationalist worldview, he states that an act such as swimming could not have been deduced, through the use of reason, from the act of walking:

If we had never seen a man swim, we might say that swimming is an impossible thing, inasmuch as, to learn to swim, we must begin by holding ourselves up in the water and, consequently, already know how to swim. Reasoning, in fact, always nails us to the solid ground. But if, quite simply, I throw myself into the water without fear, I may keep myself up well enough at first by merely struggling, and gradually adapt myself to the new environment: I shall thus have learnt to swim. So, in theory, there is a kind of absurdity in trying to know otherwise than by intelligence; but if the risk be frankly accepted, action will perhaps cut the knot that reasoning has tied. (203)

For Bergson, knowledge and understanding of our environment are produced as much by our bodies as they are by our minds. He called this physical understanding of the world ‘intuition’ describing it thus: ‘by intuition I mean instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely’ (*Creative Evolution* 186). One of Bergson’s principle aims was to re-establish intuitive thought in contemporary philosophy and propose it as a solution to some of the fundamental problems of rational thought (such as learning to swim!); as he writes in *Creative Evolution*: ‘intuition may enable us to grasp what it is intelligence fails to give us’ (187).

Bergson’s critique of purely internal, rational thought is reflected in ‘A Swimming Lesson’, which suggests that a deeper understanding of our environment can be acquired by thinking intuitively, with our bodies as well as our minds. Indeed, Burnside has discussed this idea in his writings on science, suggesting that intuitive knowledge is, in fact, the original object of scientific discovery. He returns to the Latin root of the word ‘science’ to elaborate on this point, writing that ‘*scientia*’ suggests ‘knowledge, yes, but the heuristic, questing, sometimes intuitive knowledge by which

we come to an understanding of – and *with* – the world, and of our place in it’ (‘Science of Belonging’ 94). Bergson’s ‘intuition’ returns us to this original meaning of ‘science’ and points Burnside towards a ‘new way of thinking’ about the interconnection of body and mind, self and environment. By physically exploring the borders of the dwelling space – beating the bounds – Burnside, and the figures in his poetry, are able to engage with anti-rational, intuitive understandings of their place in the world.

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If borders in Burnside’s poetry represent a creative space where new knowledge may be discovered, they also contain a latent sense of danger and threat. In his first in-depth exploration of borders, ‘The Bounds’, he writes: ‘There is a danger here [...] a danger, when you do collaborate’ (*The Hoop* 69). This sense of danger becomes an integral part of Burnside’s poetics of borders, haunting his glimpses of the quotidian. To return to the example of ‘A Swimming Lesson’, this becomes apparent at the end of the poem, when we encounter ‘policemen with hooks and lines’ and realise that the girl has been found dead in the river (*Swimming* 28). She may have transcended her bounds, gained access to the ‘continuum of being’ and attained an intuitive knowledge of herself on an ecological scale, but this has come at the cost of her life.

‘A Swimming Lesson’ finds an echo in the recent poem ‘Learning to Swim’ from *The Hunt in the Forest*. The narrator (possibly Burnside himself) recalls, as a young boy, being told by his cousin (a good Bergsonian) that the best way to learn to swim is by diving in at the deep end of the pool. The boy does this and almost drowns. Eventually he surfaces, having learned to swim, but the threat of death looms over this new knowledge and clings to him in later life:

what I remember best is the water’s answer,
the shadow it left in my blood when it let me go
and the tug in my bones that remained, like a scar, or an echo
concealing the death I had lost, but would cherish for years (1)

In his efforts to acquire new knowledge the boy is taken to the very edge of his life. Fortunately, unlike the girl in the earlier poem, he returns from this border space with only a ‘scar’.

The latent danger inherent in the representation of border spaces becomes more overtly pronounced throughout *The Hunt in the Forest*. In ‘In Memoriam’ Burnside writes:

All night, on the surgery ward,

you were still playing catch on that strip
of lamplight and grass between home and the rest of the world (4)

Here, the border ‘between home and the rest of the world’ represents the delicate line separating life and death. Indeed, the metaphor of border spaces as signifiers of death recurs so frequently throughout this collection that it soon attains the status of a metonym. Re-reading the collection, any mention of a border or threshold brings with it overt connotations of danger, death and loss. In the title poem, the tree-line of the forest serves just such a function:

no one survives the hunt: though men return
in threes or fours, their faces blank with cold,
they never quite arrive at what they seem
leaving a phrase or song from childhood
deep in the forest (2)

The men who enter the quotidian of the wild wood come back with a part of themselves missing. Their experience costs them the ability to reconnect fully with their community or share their knowledge of what they may have seen, heard and felt beyond the borders of the dwelling space.

If, in earlier collections, borders did not always symbolise death, they often connoted negative feelings associated with journeying away from home: exile, abandonment and an inability to communicate. ‘The Hunt in the Forest’ ascribes these feelings predominantly to male characters, and this is common in much of Burnside’s poetry. For these men, repeated encounters with the quotidian and wanderings beyond the borders of the dwelling space have led to exile from their homes and families. Indeed, the themes of exile and abandonment can be seen to be intrinsic to Burnside’s writings on masculinity.

In part IV of the long poem 'Epithalamium', entitled 'Borders', Burnside gives us a glimpse of the world in the voice of a trawler man who has spent too much time out in the North Sea, at the edge of human society:

Nothing's impermanent here, where nothing
is ever untouched by the wind, or the salted rain;
though our dreams can recur for weeks, they will still remain
unknowable, repeated in the dark
as everything's repeated: love; regret (*Normal Skin* 50-1)

The scene is a constant flux of presence and erasure, evoked by the repeated use of double-negatives; clarity is hard-won and fleeting. The human concepts of 'love' and 'regret' are constantly repeated, but they are 'in the dark' – unknowable and intangible. These men have been away, beyond the border of the dwelling space, for so long that they have lost their human frames of reference. They can no longer think at a human scale.

However, in the exiled men of Burnside's poems, there are glimpses of, if not necessarily redemption, at least what he calls 'grace'. In 'The Men's Harbour', Burnside suggests that the men's inability to communicate may be a sign of some kind of inexplicable knowledge:

I can't help but think
there is something they want to pass on:
a knowledge they can't quite voice though it has to do
with the grace that distinguishes strength
from power
[...]
They're out at the rim of navigable space
and ready for something no one could explain (*Asylum Dance* 60-2)

Again, we have reference here to a knowledge that can't be rationalised – an intuitive knowledge that comes from a physical (and non-verbal) interaction with the borders of the dwelling space.

Burnside does not attempt to resolve this tension between exile and grace, preferring to simply point to an alternative way of viewing these reticent, solitary men.

In the more recent poem, 'Poppy Day', the Butcher is portrayed as an almost magical siren-like figure:

The Butcher arrives with a love song
he learned from his father
[...]
he rinses off the knife and goes to work,
his voice so sweet, the children come to hear

the beauty of it, slipped between a vein
and what the veal calf thought would last
forever (*Hunt in the Forest* 30)

The beauty of the song and the brutality of the butcher's work hold the same fascination for the watching children. Following the poem's strange grammar, both the song and the knife are 'slipped' into the animal. This could be read as a new kind of 'animal encounter' poem and one that perhaps brings us closer to our true relationship with animals than any distant glimpses of geese. In his casual knife-work, the Butcher shows an intuitive knowledge based on the brutal side of our carnivorous, animal nature – a knowledge that, like the 'love song', is passed down from generation to generation.

The relationship between father and son is an important theme for Burnside. His poetry, particularly his early work, is haunted by the figure of his father. Haunted is the right word, for, wherever he appears, Burnside's father is described as an otherworldly figure, detached from reality, home and those around him. In the long sequence poem 'A Process of Separation' the poet finds himself 'subsisting in the shadow of the house, / containing, like a cyst, my father's soul' (*Normal Skin* 9). In a later section, entitled 'Pentimenti', he writes: 'This is the art of erasure, my father's craft: / working towards inevitable blanks' (11).

The poet's father is portrayed as an absence, with no stable sense of self – a man who has abandoned the socially constructed laws governing family and home. In a sense, this 'art of erasure', the dissolution of his sense of self and his wanderings into the unknown, could be seen as a perfect method for gaining access to the quotidian. However, as with the swimmer's 'gift for transformation', the father's 'art of erasure' is an unsustainable mode of being. For Burnside there is no point acquiring knowledge of the non-human or more-than-human world if you lose any human sense of meaning that

this new knowledge can be related to. To understand the self and the dwelling space at a more-than-human scale, the human side of the measure must remain intact. In 'Poetry and a Sense of Place' Burnside writes that while the 'isolated individual' is a 'meaningless concept', 'the very fact of individuation depends upon a separating out of one's self and the world that is not-self: to exist, the person must maintain his/her bounds, both in order to exist as a separate individual, and to have space in which transactions can occur' (201-2).

The simultaneous desire for belonging and exile – the desire to transgress, but also maintain, the bounds of both the dwelling space and the self – is the central tension of Burnside's writing. He explores this tension in great detail in his two memoirs, *A Lie About My Father* and *Waking Up in Toytown*, describing how it governed both his father's behaviour and his own life as a young man. In both of these books, as in his poetry, Burnside shows that an abandonment of the home and a stable sense of self can be liberating, but also dangerously destructive and isolating. This tension is integral to the way that his poetry explores the borders of the dwelling space and the relationship between the self and the quotidian. These borders must be tested and partly transgressed in order to explore a 'new way of thinking', but breaking down these borders, going too far beyond them, results in the concepts of the dwelling space and the self losing all meaning.

The long poem 'Roads' is a key exploration of Burnside's conflicting attitude towards exile and abandonment. In the first section he writes:

I have driven this road too often
and come too far
losing the taste for home
[...]
– though speaking for myself
I'd want to say
this nothing is why I am out on a starless road (*Asylum Dance* 78-9)

What lures the speaker to the road, away from the home, is the feeling of abandonment that it affords. However, 'this nothing' could easily turn into his father's 'art of erasure' if he is not careful to ensure that he returns to the known world of the dwelling space. In

the final section of the poem, 'Eternal Return', the speaker finds a kind of redemption in his recognition of the importance of his family and his realisation that the abandonment and otherness of exile is 'so much less than anything we have' (83). The repeated phrase 'forgive me', echoing through the poem's last pages, is ambiguous. It could indicate that the speaker has now returned home, or, read as the trailing echo of the speaker's voice, it perhaps suggests that he is still endlessly moving on. As in all of Burnside's poetry, the tension between belonging and exile is left unresolved; the speaker is endlessly returning, but never able to arrive home. At the end of the poem, he is still hovering on the borders between dwelling and abandonment.

In *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation*, Robert Pogue Harrison makes the point that the notion of 'abandonment' is actually intrinsic to the sense of the term 'dwelling':

I like the word "dwell" because its etymology contains the notion of abandonment. In Old English *dwellan* means precisely "to lead or go astray", as in a forest. In other words, we inhabit our estrangement, our "abandonment", even when we stay put in one particular place. (265)

This seemingly paradoxical sense of the word 'dwell' underpins Burnside's ecopoetics. His poetry attempts to negotiate the feeling of inhabiting two different kinds of estrangement – an estrangement from the unknowable more-than-human world of the quotidian, and an estrangement from our human sense of self if we go too far in our attempts to gain access to this non-human, more-than-human knowledge. We cannot dwell in the world if we make no attempt to engage with the quotidian; and yet those who attain total knowledge of the quotidian are prevented from dwelling by having gone too far in transcending their human sense of self. In balancing these two kinds of estrangement, Burnside suggests that we do not dwell in total knowledge of the 'everything that is the case' of the world, but rather in an acceptance of the limits of our knowledge and an acknowledgement of the boundaries of the dwelling space and the self.

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Burnside's repeated transgressions and reinforcements of the borders of the dwelling space are the means by which his poetry breaks down the perceived 'binding dualisms' of Bate's ecopoetics. By exploring the creative potential of human limitations,

dwelling place:

a catalogue of wrecks (*Asylum Dance 2*)

The section break doesn't interrupt the rhythm, or even the grammar of the poem. It simply signifies a new potential line of thought in the repeated meditation on the poet's 'dwelling place'. The poetic style that Burnside develops in these poems allows him to go off at tangents, exploring alternative routes and methods of negotiating and transcending the borders of the dwelling place, whilst always returning to the bounds of a limited, human understanding of his place in the world. The final image of the poem describes the name of a boat: 'S E R E N I T Y', which the poet sees as:

a name for something wanted

and believed

no more or less correct than anything

we use to make a dwelling in the world. (8)

To use Bate's terms, the single word 'Serenity' may not be able to 'restore us to our home' and offer a complete image of how we dwell in the world, but this does not mean that 'our only home is in language'. Language can help us to dwell in the world if it is used to continually question the relationship of the human self and its environment.

It seems clear that Burnside does not return to the theme of dwelling in the hope of finding a single answer or of achieving closure, but rather because this repetition is the very foundation of what it means to dwell in the world, which is to constantly beat the bounds of the self and the home. Each time Burnside returns to the borders of the dwelling space, he may appear to be doing the same thing, asking the same questions, but this repeated process allows for the potential re-imagining of what it means to dwell in the world. The success of Burnside's poetic beating the bounds is not that he actually succeeds in fully representing the quotidian. His success is that he allows the limited, human concepts of the self and the dwelling space to be read in terms of the complex, ecological scales of the quotidian and the 'everything that is the case' of the world.

**‘Mountain line and shoreline carry the melody’:
Impassable Borders in Thomas A. Clark’s Recent Poetry.**

In terms of the reception of their work, Thomas A. Clark and John Burnside stand in stark contrast. Despite the fact that he has published eight collections and numerous pamphlets since the early 1970s, Clark’s poetry has received very little critical attention¹⁴. This is perhaps due to his parallel commitments to environment concerns and experimental approaches to language and form¹⁵. This experimentation has meant that, for most of his career, Clark has been published by small presses or in anthologies of postmodern or linguistically-focused poetry. The fact that no two of Clark’s books have been published by the same press could be seen as an indication of how uneasily his work sits within the categories of ‘experimental’ or ‘mainstream’ that are most commonly used to discuss (and sell) contemporary British poetry. Where Burnside’s lyric poetry has earned him the status of one of the most influential environmental poets of our time, Clark’s work has been largely overlooked.

Yet, Burnside and Clark share more than just their Scottish nationality and overall environmental concerns. In 1989, the year of the publication of Burnside’s first collection *The Hoop*, *Agenda* magazine published this response from Clark to a questionnaire about the state of poetry in Britain:

Late one afternoon, coming across a stretch of moor above Glen Rosa on the island of Arran, tired after a day of rough walking and having to watch every step, I happened to look up and see, some yards away, a shape in the fading light. I looked at it and it looked back. The moment stretched out in the stillness when the usual business of assessing, judging and manoeuvring for advantage, has broken down or been left behind. Only when this whole process started up again, when my mind struggled into recognition, did the stag take off down the hillside.

I have seldom had such an experience from British poetry of the last twenty years or so. One knows too readily what it is. Everything in its place, a walk across the parking lot and, if there is an awareness of form, each form is

¹⁴ In 1987 Peter Dent’s Interim Press published a small pamphlet of ‘essays and reflections on the work of Thomas A. Clark’ entitled *Candid Fields*, which remains the only collected criticism of Clark’s poetry to date. Even in these early essays, Clark was being read as a poet deeply concerned with his environment and the relationship between poetry and landscape.

¹⁵ This tradition is beginning to be recognised through the publication of anthologies such as Harriet Tarlo’s *The Ground Aslant: Radical Landscape Poetry*, but has received very little critical attention.

polished, its outline clear. Too seldom is there the freshness or darkness of an encounter. (12-13)

When he mentions ‘the freshness and darkness of an encounter’, Clark expresses a perspective that is strikingly similar to Burnside’s. Both poets share the belief that poetry is a means of enacting encounters with the non-human world – a means of exploring the limits of the self and of what we can know about our environment. On a broader level, these concerns are manifested in the desire to explore the border spaces that separate human beings from those parts of their environment that are unknown or inaccessible.

A key difference, however, is that while Burnside is interested in what happens when this border is crossed, Clark is more concerned with keeping the boundary intact. The borders in Burnside’s poetry are parish boundaries, rivers, wastelands and the sea as experienced by fishermen – almost always spaces that are physically (if not mentally or spiritually) accessible. In contrast, the borders in Clark’s recent poetry take the form of mountain ranges, rock ledges, cliffs and coastlines, all of which are experienced from the perspective of a solitary walker. Where Burnside’s trawlermen may go out to ‘the rim of navigable space’, Clark’s walkers are stuck firmly on their side of the shoreline. Throughout Clark’s recent collections, the sea is described in terms of ‘margins and limits’, representing what is accessible to us on foot – the limits of what we can access as human beings, experiencing the world at the limited scale of our bodies (*Hundred Thousand Places* 27).

In this chapter I will focus on Clark’s two most recent collections, *The Hundred Thousand Places* and *The Path to the Sea* (2006). Both of these books were written after Clark’s return to Scotland in 2002 and represent his most sustained focus on landscape, in particular the coastlines and mountain ranges of the Scottish highlands. I will examine how Clark explores the interaction of language with these specific landscapes, and ask how he uses the experimental poetic techniques developed over the past forty years to address current environmental concerns. One of the key points I would like to emphasise is that, far from enacting a retreat from reality, Clark’s experimental poetics is central to his attempts to trace the connections between the human subject and their environment.

Speaking in interview about the distance he felt from many of his early contemporaries in Britain, Clark cited the American poets from the ‘Black Mountain’ School as formative influences: ‘The first time I had any idea that contemporary poetry

could be of interest at all was through American writing. From writers such as Gary Snyder, Robert Creeley, and later Charles Olson' (Herd 'Making Spaces'). I will ask how Clark has drawn on the techniques of these poets in the development of his own experimental approach to environmental poetics. While Snyder's spiritualism and Creeley's minimalist forms may be the most obvious influences, Clark's poetics can also be read in light of the aims of Charles Olson's manifesto 'Projective Verse'. I will argue that Clark's recurring explorations of mountain ranges and coastlines are attempts to recognise the limits of the human subject and attain what Olson called 'projective size' – an understanding of the self as an object at an ecological scale.

In addition to his bound collections of poetry, Clark has recently produced a number of installation works, experimenting with the effects of placing poems in specific environments and exploring the interconnection of language and landscape. I will ask how these works relate to his bound collections; in particular, how Clark uses his printed poetry and his installations to draw attention to both the limitations and creative potential of language.

All of the poems in *The Path to the Sea* describe either the act of walking, a place that the poet is walking to, or a place that he has reached, and the short vignettes that make up the ninety-six page poem of *The Hundred Thousand Places* are tied together into the overall framework of a walk from the sea, inland to a mountain and back to the coast. The act of walking is an important aspect of the beating the bounds ceremony and in Clark's poetry it becomes integral to his explorations of borders and his efforts to attain a deeper understanding of the interconnection of self and environment. In the final section of this chapter I will discuss Clark's use of walking as a creative technique that links his poetic beating the bounds with that of John Burnside.

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Clark describes the driving force behind his poetry as a desire for quiet spaces in which to think and reflect – 'for clear air, silence, responsiveness, in the midst of a life, no different from anybody's life, in which these are largely absent' (Finlay, 'Standing Still and Walking'). This desire is reflected at a formal level in his poetry. Early in *The Hundred Thousand Places* Clark describes a typical walk towards the coast:

a wide stretch of sand

you walk out
into space
as to
an appointment

with so much
space around you
intention
drops from you (14)

The movement towards openness and quietness that Clark finds along the coastline is reflected in the minimalist form. The lack of punctuation allows the short stanzas and lines to dictate the pace of the poem, which asks to be read slowly, with close attention paid to each word and image. We are asked to work our way forwards, carefully, as if following a path – to align ourselves with Clark’s desire to let ‘intention’ drop away. Rather than fill the space and silence with other thoughts, we are asked to appreciate what is in front of us in its own right.

However, if Clark is attempting to write non-deterministic poetry, it seems strange that he adopts the second person mode of address, which at first glance suggests an instructive, if not imperative, tone. Reviewers of *The Hundred Thousand Places* have commented on Clark’s use of the second person as a means of creating a ‘shared experience’ and a sense of ‘commonality’¹⁶. Peter Riley believes that Clark’s rejection of the lyric ‘I’ works with his pared-down style to produce poetry that focuses on the environment rather than the poet himself:

If the writing remains stripped down, what is eliminated is not so much the inessentials [...] but subjectivity of address, the urging of the self into the reader’s sights as the medium of engagement (the grossest possible form of which now dominates wilderness and other documentaries on television – ‘Watch me being there. Pretend you’re me’). (56)

Clark has stated that he doesn’t write about particular environments in order to persuade his readers to go there¹⁷. Instead, he is concerned with encouraging people to be

¹⁶ See Riley ‘Quick – Slow’; and Wheatley’s review in *The Guardian* Sat 31st October 2009.

¹⁷ See interview with Alec Finlay ‘Standing Still and Walking in Strath Nethy’.

attentive to their own environment, wherever that may be. In this context, the use of ‘you’ lends his poetry the tone of a guide – at times an annotated map of the highlands, at others a kind of spiritual handbook or sutra. As we read on, we realise that these two types of guide are, for Clark, one and the same.

Underpinning Clark’s poetry is the conviction that larger environmental concerns can only begin to be understood through attentiveness to the details of our specific environments. As such, Clark’s poems are founded on minute observation of the details of the Scottish landscape:

asphodel, milkwort
eyebright, ling
the lovely particulars
brighter than their names

through crushed water-mint
through particulars you come (*Hundred 25*)

Here, Clark suggests that it is only through quiet attention to the ‘particulars’ of the landscape that we can begin to think ecologically about our place in the world. A deeper understanding of our relationship with our environment cannot be theorised in abstract terms – it can only be explored through attentiveness to the particular details of our environment, seen in particular places, at particular times.

The extensive use of white space on every page of his latest collections can be read as a representation of the time and space needed to be truly attentive to these particulars; as John Freeman writes:

Poetry has its own means for nurturing attentiveness. They involve listening with attention to words, cadences, and the silences around words (“the halo round the word”). Usually they involve at the same time attentiveness to non-verbal perceptions as well. (13)

In Clark’s poetry, the extensive use of white space around the words functions as a means of nurturing attentiveness. In this way, the space becomes almost as important as the words themselves to the development of his environmental poetics.

Both Clark's minimalism and use of the second person could be compared to the forms and expressive modes of traditional Chinese and Japanese poetry. His recent collections are full of stanzas that could function as stand-alone maxims or Zen-like statements. While not written in strict syllabic form, Clark's poems share the tone and imagistic focus of haiku:

that you may not only
see but feel
the wind pushes against you
abrupt silences fill (*Path to the Sea* 14)

In the same way that Gary Snyder incorporates East-Asian forms and spirituality into his representations of American landscapes, Clark draws on these imported forms to evoke the quietness and stillness that he finds in his own Scottish environment. In 'Blue Mountains Constantly Walking', Snyder discusses depictions of nature in Chinese art which may further explain the sustained focus on mountains and coastlines in Clark's poetry: 'In common usage the compound "mountains and waters" – *shan-shui* in Chinese – is the straightforward term for landscape. Landscape painting is "mountains and waters pictures"' (102). Mountains create rain and water shapes the landscape, therefore: "Mountains and waters" is a way to refer to the totality of the process of nature' (102).

In Clark's recent poetry, the vast expanses of sky and water beyond the mountains and coastlines could be read as representations of 'the totality of the process of nature' – a concept that is too large and complex to be understood at limited, human scales. In *The Hundred Thousand Places* Clark describes the moment when the subject of his poem first sees the mountain he/she is walking towards:

it knocks you back
for a moment
the force of it
straddling the path

you must gather
your wits and go
forward in a new

The subject's attempt to 'go forward' towards a deeper understanding of their relationship to their environment necessitates a reconsideration of their sense of self in terms of the more-than-human scales of the mountain. This reconsideration begins with a recognition of human limitations, which is reflected in the brevity, silences and spaces of Clark's poetry. The minimalism of the poem reflects the limited agency of the human subject considered at the scales of 'the totality of the process of nature'.

In an interview with Alec Finlay, Clark said: 'I would maintain that we can't know ourselves except in relation to everything that is not ourselves. It's in order to focus on this relation that so much is excluded from my work' ('Standing Still and Walking'). The desire to understand the self in terms of 'everything that is not ourselves' links Clark's poetics with Burnside's attempt to 'describe and celebrate the 'everything that is the case' of the world' ('Science of Belonging' 92). For both poets, a deeper understanding of our relationship with our environment comes from an understanding of the self at non-human, more-than-human scales. However, both poets employ very different techniques in their attempts to represent this ecocentric view of the self. Burnside's vivid descriptions of transformations and intuitive experiences test the limits of figurative language as a means of expressing the inexpressible complexity of the 'quotidian'. By contrast, Clark largely avoids the use of figurative language, instead relying on the spaces and silences around brief descriptions of his immediate environment, to suggest that 'everything that is not ourselves' can be inferred, but not directly represented. At the end of *The Hundred Thousand Places*, the sea is described as possessing 'another knowledge / wild and cold' – a kind of knowledge that the walker, bound by the impassable border of the coastline, will never be able to access (95).

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If his poetry attempts to connect the human in the landscape with the more-than-human scales of mountains, sea and sky, Clark's impassable boundaries may (rather obviously) seem to present something of an impasse. However, by tracing the influence of Charles Olson on Clark's poetics, we can see how his cliffs and mountain ranges are integral to his explorations of an ecocentric understanding of the self. In terms of the actual poetry that they produced, Clark and Olson may appear only distantly related. At first glance,

the long lines of *The Maximus Poems* bear little resemblance to the compact, controlled stanzas of Clark's poetry. Yet, when we consider Olson's writings on poetics, the early influence on Clark becomes more apparent. Olson's manifesto 'Projective Verse' and the concept of 'open field' poetics are regarded as central to the development not only of American poets such as Snyder, Creeley and the Black Mountain School, but also a generation of poets in Britain. In the introduction to the anthology *Other* (1999), Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain discuss the particular appeal of Olson's poetics:

The great attraction of Olson's poetics was, first, its insistence (following perhaps the lead of Thoreau) that intelligence is inseparable from the whole range of immediate, physical, bodily perception; second, that the mind pay close attention to the perceptual rather than the conceptual field [...]; and third – as corollary – that the immediacies of local history and geography [...] are the only source and ground of knowledge, action and use. (xxvi)

Caddel and Quartermain examine how this call for poetry based on direct perception of the poet's immediate environment, was taken up by British writers seeking to challenge the 'conventional and unconscious ideologies' of their time (xxvi). In this sense it served as a manifesto for the emerging political poetry of the sixties. However, in writers such as Clark, I believe that we can see Olson's poetics being interpreted in a much quieter way, that perhaps has more relevance for an environmentally conscious politics and poetics of the twenty first century.

Based on Caddel and Quartermain's summary of Olson's poetic project, it is surprising that he is not more widely recognised as an important environmental poet. An essay by Matthew Cooperman entitled 'Charles Olson: Archaeologist of Morning, Ecologist of Evening' is the first to offer an overtly ecocritical reading of Olson's poetry and poetics. Summarizing Olson's environmental poetics, Cooperman writes:

If Olson is interested in a way of interacting with the world, then his work helps theorize the relationship of poetry and poetics to the environment, and it cultivates an environmental imagination that places the human entirely in the context of the natural world such that binaries between nature/culture, civilized/wild, human/nature, and local/global become, if not irrelevant, highly questionable. (212)

Cooperman provides an excellent ecocritical reading of Olson's broader philosophy – a philosophy that incorporated Whitehead's writings on 'process', Herodotus' histories and the cultural geography of Carl Sauer. In my view, however, the ideas that most pertain to modern environmental poets like Clark, can be found in Olson's manifesto 'Projective Verse', which Cooperman only touches on briefly in his essay.

In 'Projective Verse', through a description of 'open field' or 'projective' poetry, Olson provides some important insights into the ways in which poetry can help us to attain a deeper understanding of our environment. He describes the main 'principle' of projective poetry as follows: 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT' [original capitalisation] (*Selected Writings* 16). This principle is central to any kind of ecomimetic writing, which aims to accurately reflect the conditions of a specific environment in formal or linguistic terms. I have already touched on this idea in Clark's poetry: the openness and minimalism of his verse is a direct reflection of the experience of walking along a cliff or mountain path, with only a narrow stretch of land that is immediately accessible and vast open spaces beyond. By allowing the poem's content (the walker's environment) to shape its form, Clark diminishes the significance of the lyric self as an active agent in the structuring of the poem – a reflection of the limited agency of the human subject viewed at an ecological scale. Clark's focus on the agency of the landscape in both guiding the walker's movements and shaping the poem, echoes Olson's view of nature as 'that force to which [a man] owes his somewhat small existence' (*Selected Writings* 25). For both Clark and Olson, recognising the limitations of our 'somewhat small existence' is integral to attaining an understanding of the self at a more-than-human, ecological scale.

Olson develops his view of the limited agency of the human subject, through his adaptation of the principles of 'Objectivism' to create 'Objectism' – a new kind of poetics that promotes an ecocentric view of the lyric self:

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature [...] and those other creatures of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. (24)

In Olson's 'Objectism', the lyric subject is reconceived as merely another object in the world. This view of the humans as objects chimes with Timothy Clark's assertion that any literature that functions at an ecological scale will necessarily be 'object-oriented',

thus destabilising traditional notions of selfhood. He writes that ‘a person registers there less in terms of familiar social coordinates (race, class, gender and so on) than as a physical entity’ (‘Derangements of Scale’ 161). However, this shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric definitions of the self poses certain problems: ‘while it highlights the hidden costs of lower scale thinking, the [...] tendency to register a person primarily as a physical *thing* is evidently problematic, almost too brutally removed from the daily interpersonal ethics, hopes and struggles that it ironizes’ (163).

Where Timothy Clark sees the definition of humans as objects necessarily leading to the problematic reduction of people to ‘things’, Olson suggests a way of moving towards an ecocentric, object-oriented perspective, whilst still retaining certain anthropocentric values. For Olson, disposing of ‘the individual as ego’ and recognising that we are objects in the world is fundamentally an act of humility. He states that if ‘the artist’ wants to understand anything about their relationship with their environment, he/she must recognise and attend to the limits of his/her ‘somewhat small existence’:

If he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist’s act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man. (25)

If the artist is attentive to his/her own limits (his/her immediate, accessible environment) then he/she can gain access to knowledge beyond these limits and achieve what Olson calls ‘size, projective size’ (25) – a goal that can be interpreted as an understanding of the self at a more-than-human, ecological scale.

The impassable borders of Thomas A. Clark’s poetry serve to generate a sense of humility in the human subject, highlighting both physical and mental limitations. While the subject is stuck within their limits, Clark shows that attentiveness to the details of other objects in their immediate environment may allow the subject to imaginatively transcend the bounds of an anthropocentric view of the self:

a path through the gold
of bird’s foot trefoil
delayed by the pink
of thrift or campion

as it turns
in the long grasses
you are coloured
by events

there where
you lose yourself
brightness
takes your place (*Hundred* 16)

Such images of self-dispersal recur throughout Clark's poetry and, frequently, are preceded by a list of specific details of the landscape – in this case, flowers. The flowers appear and are named at the steady pace of the subject moving through the landscape. The rhythm of the naming gives the poem the tone of an incantation or perhaps a kind of meditational chant designed to encourage an opening up, or displacement, of the self. As the subject's attention is drawn to the other objects in the landscape, his/her own sense of self is momentarily 'lost'.

For Clark, the details of his environment do not simply provide the background for his poems; rather, they provide a means of understanding the self at a more-than-human scale: 'the locality is not just a resource – it's an enlargement' (Finlay, 'Standing Still and Walking'). In *The Hundred Thousand Places*, Clark uses language strikingly similar to Olson's to suggest that close perception of objects in the landscape provides the basis for attaining projective size: 'what is at hand / supports or projects you / you have a mind to / green and gold' (68). The anthropocentric concept of the 'mind' is described in the ecocentric terms of the 'green and gold' of the landscape. The close attention that Clark pays to the details of cliffs, coastlines and mountain paths throughout his poetry, provides the basis for an understanding of the self in relation to the totality of the environment beyond these borders.

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Clark's association with the kind of formal and linguistic innovation pioneered by Olson, means that he is particularly interested in how words relate to their physical contexts – literally, how words can impact on an environment and how a specific

environment can influence the meaning of words. Clark has explored these concerns in a series of recent site-specific installations, which provide a useful context to the formal and linguistic experimentation of his bound collections of poetry. These installations experiment with the placing of words and poems in a range of different environments, from painting them on the walls of a waiting room in a Glasgow hospital, to printing them on t-shirts worn by archaeologists taking part in a dig on Orkney¹⁸. This aspect of Clark's work undoubtedly stemmed from his friendship with Ian Hamilton Finlay, who was similarly influenced by post-war American poetics, and whose 'concrete poetry' explored the effects of making poems out of materials such as wood, stone and glass¹⁹. However, while Ian Hamilton Finlay's work stems, predominantly, from Modernist, Objectivist theories about language, Clark's installations engage specifically with environmental concerns.

One of Clark's most interesting works in this vein is 'The Hidden Place Project'. This project was based around the creation of an alternative map of Scotland, in which one hundred place names were replaced by phrases revealing their original Gaelic meanings. Clark also produced alternative road signs, which were erected next to the official signs at the edges of these towns, cities and villages²⁰. In this project Clark calls into question the relationship between names and the places they designate, asking how the act of naming can both construct and alter our understanding of those places. In his introduction to the project's blog, he writes that 'it changes our perception of a place to learn that Glasgow is a green hollow, Greenock a sunny hill [...] or that Pollokshaws is a little pool in the woods' (thehiddenplaceproject.blogspot.com). Specifically, it changes the *scale* at which we perceive each place, by connecting names that we are used to thinking about at human scales with the places as they exist or (more commonly) *existed* at ecological scales. Like the beating the bounds ceremony, the Hidden Place project provides an alternative map in which places are defined by their geographical and ecological characteristics rather than their official boundaries. In Clark's map, it is the names themselves that are revisited and redefined, providing an important insight into the historical interconnection of communities and their environments. This redefinition raises awareness that even the country's most built-up areas are meaningful in both anthropocentric and ecocentric terms.

¹⁸ For a good introduction to Clark's recent work see the poet's blog at <<http://thomasaclarkblog.blogspot.com>>

¹⁹ See Clark's introduction to Finlay *A Model of Order: Selected Letters on Poetry and Making*.

²⁰ For more information on this project see <<http://www.thehiddenplaceproject.blogspot.com>>

The fact that, today, ‘Pollokshaws’ bears no resemblance to a ‘little pool in the woods’ may suggest that Clark’s map and road signs are defunct. However, it is this very disparity that offers the potential for a reconsideration of how places could be defined both anthropocentrically and ecocentrically. The unexpected re-scaling of the place-names that occurs when we read their original meanings, forces us to think beyond our preconceived definitions of our environment. Clark’s work forces us to question the validity of the names we ascribe to places; not in a purely poststructuralist, relativist manner, but in a way that celebrates the deeper understanding and enhanced experience of our environment that words, names and especially poetry has the *potential* to afford us.

These concerns are central to his recent bound collections of poetry, in which the impassable borders of cliffs and mountains function as sites where he can explore the creative potential of the perceived border separating word and world. The minimalist forms, the slow, contemplative pace and extensive use of white space, force the reader to question and reflect on every single printed word. Clark asks the reader to engage in an intense scrutiny of the words on the page, which may seem to indicate a self-conscious, postmodern kind of poetry – a negative poetics constantly highlighting its own inability to represent its object of attention. However, the very minimalism and white space that generates this sense of self-consciousness, is itself a reflection of the environment that Clark is attempting to represent – the open space and silence of coastlines and mountains. Clark’s use of language and form generates both self-consciousness and ‘environment-consciousness’ – a simultaneous awareness of the limits of poetry and a deeper understanding of the environment it is attempting to evoke. So, even when writing self-reflexively, Clark creates a positive poetry that moves towards a deeper understanding of the interconnection of self and environment.

Clark’s poetics is founded on an awareness of the limits of language, but also a faith in words as viable tools for understanding our place in the world. As John Freeman writes:

There is no pretence that the language of any poem can be inevitable or transparent. But neither is there an obsession with this fact to the point of denying the possibility of reference to anything beyond language: language here is not solely its own subject. Clark steers between Scylla and Charybdis. (12)

Here, the route that Clark ‘steers’, between opposing dead-ends of outdated positivism and extreme relativism, is one that has been plotted by Critical Realist philosophy. Looking at Clark’s work with the principles of Critical Realism in mind can provide a useful insight into his attitude towards language. To return to a passage that I quoted earlier, when Clark writes of ‘the lovely particulars / brighter than their names’ he is recognising the inability of language to fully represent the details of the landscape, while simultaneously playing with the fact that this recognition does not dim the brightness of the names themselves: ‘asphodel, milkwort / eyebright, ling’ (*Hundred* 25). As with the ‘Hidden Place’ project, Clark draws our attention to the perceived disparity between word and world; but he does so with the aim of challenging our unconscious, anthropocentric perceptions of our environment, encouraging us to pay attention to its ‘lovely particulars’ on its own terms.

The impassable borders of Clark’s recent poetry are spaces where he can explore human limitations, both linguistic and physical. For Clark, these limitations are not to be lamented, but rather celebrated for the deeper understanding that they have the potential to afford.

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The limitations of the human subject are further explored and celebrated through Clark’s focus on walking as a creative act. Clark’s interest in walking links his poetry with the work of Land Artists such as Hamish Fulton and Richard Long, who employ the act of walking as an art form in its own right. Richard Long writes that ‘a walk can measure time and space, I can make stones move around, leave them in different places, exchange them, scatter them, bring them together. A walk can easily articulate all those fundamental aspects of time and matter’ (*Walking the Line* 128). For Long, walking scales the human subject in relation to the ‘fundamental aspects of time and matter’, at once reminding him/her of the fleeting nature of their movements and thoughts, but also allowing for an articulation of these movements and thoughts in relation to the wider environment. For the subject in Clark’s poetry, it is the very fact of travelling on foot that renders the borders of mountains and coastlines impassable, thus limiting the subject’s capacity for total connection with their environment. However, by being constantly, physically reminded of these limitations, the walker is forced to turn their attention to the details of the landscape at their feet. As we have seen, in Clark’s poetry

this act of attentiveness is precisely what allows for moments of deeper understanding, when the subject can experience their sense of self at more-than-human scales.

Speaking to Alec Finlay, Clark explains the centrality of walking to his creative process: ‘essentially it gives me a time in parenthesis, a contemplative time, when contemporary pressures are kept outside the brackets so to speak’ (‘Standing Still and Walking’). For Clark, walking is a therapeutic act, providing a time when the subject can free themselves from any extraneous thoughts and focus on the immediacies of their environment:

all the little knots
of anxiety and tension
slowly unravelling
of affection and disaffection
slowly unravelling
the dried grasses trembling

if you move
lightly
events will start
up from your feet (*Hundred* 53)

Here, the rhythm of the walk shifts the poem’s focus from the internal worries of ‘anxiety’ and ‘tension’ to the ‘dried grasses’ in the walker’s path. Peter Riley likens the rhythm of Clark’s recent poetry to that of a walker’s footsteps: ‘What really engages us in this trek is the prosody – insistent two-beat lines like the placing of left and right foot again and again, occasionally lurching or stumbling but always pressing onwards from one poem to the next’ (55). The rhythm of the walk drives the verse onwards, but the short lines and stanzas also work in counterpoint to the forward motion, forcing the reader to pause and pay attention to every word and image. The pace becomes that of a specific kind of walker – one who isn’t aiming for a particular destination, but is instead allowing the landscape to determine their path and letting ‘events [...] start up from [their] feet’.

On his author page on the Scottish Poetry Society website, Clark cites the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s book *The Perception of the Environment* as a ‘current

interest'²¹. The influence of this book becomes particularly apparent when we consider the role of walking in Clark's poetry. Ingold writes that the main aim of his study 'is to replace the stale dichotomy of nature and culture with the dynamic synergy of organism and environment, in order to regain a genuine ecology of life' (16). By focussing on the ways in which subjects perceive and interact with their environment on a physical level, Ingold proposes an 'alternative mode of understanding based on the premise of our engagement with the world, rather than our detachment from it' (11). For Ingold, knowledge cannot be reduced to the accumulation of abstract information; rather it consists 'in the capacity to situate such information, and understand its meaning, within the context of a direct perceptual engagement with our environments' (21). As we have already seen, direct perception of the particulars of the landscape is central to Clark's poetry. Access to open space and the possibility of attaining 'projective size' are predicated on the actions and perceptions of the individual in their immediate environment.

If Ingold's 'alternative mode of understanding' is based on perception and action, then the ways in which we move through, and negotiate, our environment are central to our knowledge of it:

Contrary to the assumptions of cartographers and cognitive map theorists, life is not contained within things, nor is it transported about. It is rather laid down along paths of movement, of action and perception. Every living being, accordingly, grows and reaches out into the environment along the sum of its paths. (242)

For Ingold then, our sense of self is not only influenced by our environment, it is shaped by the 'paths' that we take and the ways in which we perceive and engage with the landscapes that we travel through. Our understanding of our environment must be based on movement because, as Ingold points out, our environment is not static: 'the world of our experience is a world suspended in movement, that is continually coming into being as we – through our movement – contribute to its formation' (242). Our ability to navigate through and make meaning out of our environment – what Ingold calls 'wayfinding' – is, therefore, entirely dependent on our perception of the movement around us:

²¹ See <http://www.spl.org.uk/poets_a-z/clark.html#links> This statement was written in 2006, the year of publication of *The Path to the Sea*.

Above all, wayfinding depends upon the attunement of the traveller's movements in response to the movements, in his or her surroundings, of other people, animals, the wind, celestial bodies and so on. Where nothing moves there is nothing to which one can respond. (242)

This raises some interesting questions if we consider that the central aim of Clark's poetry is to achieve a state of stillness and silence. In a constantly changing, constantly moving, environment, is it ever possible to achieve such a state? Potential answers to these questions can be found in Clark's poem 'At Dusk & At Dawn':

walk for a while beside a river
and beneath the sound of flowing water
or within the sound of flowing water
you will begin to hear and feel
that which does not sound or flow
if you walk alone beside a river
and listen to the sound of rushing water
the haste and din of rushing water
will stun you into stillness (*Path to the Sea* 76)

In this poem Clark suggests that, in order to find stillness and silence, the landscape itself does not need to be static. Rather, stillness and silence are achieved by the subject becoming so attuned to the movement of their environment that they no longer perceive it as movement. For both Clark and Ingold, walking is the simplest and most effective means of reaching this state of attunement, and thereby gaining an understanding of the self in relation to the ecocentric processes at work in our environment.

The notion of walking as an activity that allows for an understanding of the self in relation to its environment returns us to the links between Clark's and Burnside's poetics. In 'The Science of Belonging' Burnside makes what he calls 'a simple, banal, absurdly unambitious suggestion about walking' as a means of reconnecting with our environment: 'What I would [...] suggest is that, on foot, we become ecologists because, walking, we have the potential to see the world as it is, not in virtual glimpses through a VCR or a car windscreen, but as the here and now, the intimate ground of our being' (97).

Both poets contribute to a long literary and philosophical tradition that regards the act of walking as fundamental to a deeper engagement with, and understanding of, our environment. Rebecca Solnit provides an excellent guide to this tradition in her book *Wanderlust*. Here, she writes of potential of walking for affecting, not just our thoughts, but the *way* that we think: ‘While walking, the body and the mind can work together, so that thinking becomes a physical, rhythmic act – so much for the Cartesian mind/body divide’ (xv). Solnit’s theories are echoed in both Burnside’s and Clark’s poetry, where walking provides a means of engaging in a *physical* understanding of the world – an understanding that may allow us to move beyond the perceived dualisms of interior/exterior, subject/object and self/world that frame our relationship with our environment. By focussing the mind on the rhythms generated by physical movement, walking stops us thinking *about* our environment and encourages us to think *with* our environment.

For Peter Riley, walking is integral to Clark’s poetic attempts to maintain a good spiritual relationship with the world:

The fact of being and moving on the earth’s surface by your own effort becomes a moral act through the dutiful accuracy of the language which identifies it. The experience is enhanced into a kind of physical wisdom in which the self is subsumed into the landscape. (55)

Riley’s observation connects the act of walking to the attentiveness with which Clark perceives and writes about his environment. These two activities come together to form a ‘physical wisdom’ that can be likened to the ‘intuitive’ knowledge that I discussed in terms of Burnside’s poetry in the previous chapter. Importantly, as both of these poets are concerned with negotiating border spaces, walking can be seen as a means of occupying a constant state of inbetweenness, or, to use Clark’s phrase, being ‘in parenthesis’. Whilst walking, the subject simultaneously inhabits both their human limitations and an intuitive, physical knowledge of their wider environment – they are able to experience the self at both human and ecological scales. Just as the walk from boundary stone to boundary stone is an integral part of the beating the bounds ceremony, walking is fundamental to both Burnside’s and Clark’s explorations of border spaces, affording the subjects of their poems an experience of the landscape in relation to their movements, and their movements in relation to the landscape.

However, there is an important difference between these two poets. For

Burnside, walking, swimming or any other physical activity has the potential to become a means of crossing the border between the human world and the 'quotidian'.

Conversely, for Clark, walking reinforces the boundary between the human and non-human worlds, forcing a constant awareness of the walker's limits, of where they can't (and perhaps shouldn't) go. Walking, for Clark, is a means of appreciating the physical impact that we can have on our environment, whilst also being aware of our comparative insignificance in relation to it. Peter Gillies writes that: 'like all astute nature writers, he makes us feel better informed about both the vulnerability and power of the planet while emphasising that as humans, we will follow only a tiny and momentary path on its surface' (stridemagazine.co.uk). Clark's poetry connects human and more-than-human scales through his recognition of the limits of human action and poetic language. In the next chapter I will examine how Alice Oswald attempts to represent something more than a 'tiny momentary path' in her poetic 'songline' *Dart*.

Singing like a River: The Ecocentric Voice of Alice Oswald's *Dart*.

In the last two chapters I examined how John Burnside and Thomas A. Clark use their explorations of borders to test the limits of the human self, poetic language and anthropocentric systems of thought. Through a recognition of these limits, both poets attempt to move, or think, beyond them and work towards alternative, ecocentric views of the relationship between the self and its environment. Alice Oswald takes the opposite approach in her long poem *Dart*, choosing, instead, to inhabit and write directly from the ecocentric perspective of the river. In her introductory note, she explains that while the poem 'is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart. [...] All voices should be read as the river's mutterings' (v). Like Burnside and Clark, Oswald views her creative process as an attempt to transcend the traditional lyric self and 'give the poetic voice the slip' (Brown and Paterson 209). However, Oswald goes further than Burnside or Clark, taking a creative leap that gives voice and agency to the river itself. For Oswald, 'the structure comes off the river, the transitions are geographical not rational' (Brown and Paterson 208).

Oswald describes *Dart* as 'a sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea' (*Dart* v). Oswald's use of the term 'songline' is important here, linking her poetics with an ancient belief in the interconnectedness of landscape and voice. This chapter will examine Oswald's use of the songline as a poetic form that enables her to explore and inhabit an ecocentric voice. Oswald's tracing of the Dart's songline can be likened to Burnside's and Clark's beating the bounds in its sustained focus on the physical interaction of people with the border space of the river. Just as Burnside and Clark saw this physical interaction as a means of (literally) moving towards an intuitive understanding of their environments, Oswald shows the movement of people along, across and in the river to be integral to the ecocentric voice of her songline.

Throughout this chapter, I will discuss Oswald's use of the river as a creative border space where the boundaries between self, voice and environment become blurred. Like Burnside's borders, the river Dart becomes a space of transformation, where Oswald draws on the classical theme of metamorphosis, adapting it to suit her environmental poetics. The river serves as a locus for these transformations and alternative views of the self, while also providing a site where Oswald can experiment with a radically different view of language, which underpins her evocation of the river's voice.

The title of this chapter draws on Aldo Leopold's ecological concept of 'thinking like a mountain'. I will discuss how Oswald's attempt to 'sing like a river' provides an insight into what it might be like to 'think like a mountain' at more-than-human, ecological scales. However, I will also question whether a writer who attempts to give voice to non-human entities could be charged with anthropomorphism; and, if Oswald's poetry *could* be called anthropomorphic, is this necessarily a bad thing?

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The concept of the songline has been revisited, in recent years, by various environmental writers exploring the connection between language and landscape. In the original Australian Aboriginal mythology, songlines refer to the paths taken by the 'Ancestors' during the 'Dreamtime', when they sang the world into being. In *Wild*, Jay Griffiths explains:

Land is crisscrossed with invisible paths or lines which people can travel along: the paths are the ways the Ancestors took in the Dreamtime. These paths are memorized in the form of songs that describe the land, providing a map in music with which you can find your way for hundreds of miles. (35)

For Griffiths, the concept of the songline is integral to her exploration of 'wild language' – a means of expression that grows out of specific environments and acts as an alternative to dominant, Western, rationalist discourses. She writes that 'songlines don't sing *about* nature, they sing nature itself, voicing crevasse and rock, tree and dune' (251).

In *The Old Ways* Robert Macfarlane describes the songline as a means of communicating an embodied, experiential understanding of one's environment. Drawing on Bruce Chatwin's 'flawed but influential account' in *Songlines*, Macfarlane writes that 'to sing out was [...] therefore to find one's way, and storytelling was indivisible from wayfaring' (30-1). For both Griffiths and Macfarlane, the songline is an important concept for their examinations of the interconnection of language and landscape, and the attunement of people to their environment. Griffiths writes: 'so the land sings, people resonate with it, and it makes them feel rung to a sung pitch' (251). In *Dart*, the songline provides the perfect form for Oswald to explore the themes of interconnection and attunement as she traces the border of the river.

The poem begins with the Dart – ‘this secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound’ – finding its way into a Walker’s head: ‘working / into the drift of his thinking’ (1). Immediately, we see the movement of the external environment affecting a person’s internal thoughts. Elsewhere we meet a Naturalist who ‘belongs to the soundmarks of larks’ and an Eel Watcher ‘contracted to an eye-quiet world’ (5, 6). The poem is a catalogue of people living on and around the Dart, whose voices and identities are shaped by the river, but who, in turn, come together to make up ‘the river’s mutterings’. From the poem’s outset it is clear that this linguistic interaction can only take place because of the physical interactions of the speakers with their environment. When the Walker first sees the river, it is described in terms of walking: ‘one step-width water / of linked stones’ (2). As he walks alongside the river, the voices of walker and river mingle so that when we hear a list of the places they pass through – ‘Sandyhole, Sittaford, Hartyland, Postbridge’ – we cannot tell who is speaking (3).

This early focus on walking immediately suggests comparisons with Clark’s long poem *The Hundred Thousand Places*. Indeed, both poems show the movement of a walker through a landscape leading to the breakdown of the dualisms of internal/external, subject/object and self/world. However, elsewhere in *Dart*, we find that it is not just walking that allows people to attune themselves to their environment – we encounter people fishing after work, or ‘slowly methodically swimming rid of their jobs’ (24). This is a significant difference between Oswald’s and Clark’s long poems. In *The Hundred Thousand Places* the footsteps of the solitary walker maintain a consistent rhythm and form; whereas, in *Dart*, the very different movements of swimmers, canoeists, poachers and ferrymen generate variation in the shape and tone of the poem.

In the final paragraph of *Consorting with Angels* Deryn Rees-Jones writes that ‘there is much more to be said about Oswald’s work’, in particular her ‘new, if precarious, way of exploring the self, and the poetic relationship between text, voice and body’ (240). Various reviews and interviews have focused on the ‘physicality’ of Oswald’s poetry and the attention that she pays to the ways in which people navigate and physically experience their environment²². I would like to build on this by suggesting that, just as the shape and meaning of a songline is intrinsically linked to the movement of its speaker, so the style, rhythm and form of *Dart* is intimately connected to the specific movements of the ‘voices’ along the course of the river. Towards the end of the poem, the ‘Dreamer’ says: ‘I saw all things catch and reticulate / into this

²² See Sutherland-Smith ‘Water Musics’; Winterson ‘New Poetry by Alice Oswald’; and Knight ‘Tales from the Riverbank’.

dreaming of the Dart' (28). This image of 'reticulation' finds an echo in the movement of people in, across and around the river – a movement that provides Oswald's 'songline' with both its content and form.

Songlines are a communal form, learned, traditionally, by a whole community and passed on from one generation to the next. They are a form of mapping, like the beating the bounds ceremony, that emphasises the connections between community and environment. These connections are fundamental to *Dart*, which began as part of the Poetry Society's 'Poetry Places' scheme and is the result of two years' worth of interviews and conversations with people who live and work along the river.

Oswald's focus on communality highlights a significant difference between her poetics and the work discussed in the previous chapters. For Burnside and Clark, deeper understandings of the self in more-than-human terms come from being alone, away from other people. As such, the border spaces that they explore are solitary places, located at the edges of the human world. Oswald's river is very different. It is a border at the centre of a community, surrounded by human habitations. So, while it functions in a similar way to Burnside's and Clark's borders – as a site where the interaction of human and non-human perspectives can be explored – it is, fundamentally a shared space, constantly visited and occupied by people. Indeed, for most of the speakers in *Dart*, the river is the source of their livelihood, the very reason that they settled in this particular place. Unlike Clark's empty coastlines and mountain ranges, or Burnside's half-glimpsed thresholds of the 'quotidian', Oswald's river is a *central* part of everyday human life. People travel its length, crossing and re-crossing it on a regular basis. The river is spanned by bridges, fords and ferry links; it is crossed by swimmers, rowers and even by walkers, where it begins as a marsh near Cranmere pool.

For Oswald, the habitual interaction of people and the river does not lead to the river being taken for granted. On the contrary, throughout *Dart*, these habitual interactions form the basis of relationships between people and their environment that go deeper than the everyday use of the river for work or leisure. Particularly poignant examples range from the small act of the Dairy Worker factoring a duck's nest into her 'routine checks', to the much bigger realization of the Rememberer, who sees 'a whole millennium going by in the form of a wave' (29, 45).

In Oswald's representation of the river as a force that impacts on the lives of its inhabitants, one can clearly see the influence of Ted Hughes' *River*. Terry Gifford describes *River* as 'the last themed collection of [Hughes'] own work to engage directly

with humans' relationship with the forces of the natural world' (56)²³. Throughout the collection, rivers are described in terms of their immense age and power. In 'The West Dart' the river 'spills from the Milky Way, spiked with light'; in 'The River' it is described as 'a god, and inviolable. / Immortal' (*Collected Poems* 658, 664). Hughes presents rivers as more-than-human agencies that act upon his sense of self, forcing him to think about his place in the world at the scales of salmon migrations, seasons, celestial bodies and the movements of enormous volumes of water. In 'Salmon Eggs' he writes:

I lean and watch the water, listening to water
Till my eyes forget me

And the piled flow supplants me, the mud-blooms

All this ponderous light of everlasting
Collapsing away under its own weight (680)

Here, Hughes is 'supplanted' by the river – his self is 'forgotten' as he becomes aware of the timelessness and sheer physical scale of the water. Oswald develops these themes in *Dart*, exploring the ways in which the more-than-human agency of the river forces its inhabitants to view themselves in non-human and more-than-human terms.

Oswald's and Hughes' view of the effects of rivers on the self chimes with Heidegger's assertion, in his study of Hölderlin's hymn 'The Ister', that the path of a river 'tears human beings out of the habitual midst of their lives, so that they may be in a centre outside of themselves, that is, be exocentric' (28). In the context of Oswald's and Hughes' poetry, this 'exocentrism' could be read as 'ecocentrism'. For both poets, rivers are border spaces where people can move beyond habitual anthropocentric concerns, towards more ecocentric views of their relationship with their environment. Oswald goes further than Hughes, however, in her attempts to evoke the ecocentric voice of the river itself. By viewing the river as a songline, Oswald presents it as a site of formal and linguistic experimentation, where she can explore the limits of poetic voice.

²³ For further ecological/ecocritical reading of *River* see Roberts *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* 140-6; Scigaj *Ted Hughes*; and Gifford *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* 132-56.

Oswald has described *Dart* as her attempt to move beyond anthropocentric, ‘poetic’ representations of rivers and ‘get through to technical, unwritten accounts of water’ (Brown and Paterson 209). Oswald is fascinated by the movement and forms of this ‘wobbly element’ (34). The ‘named varieties of water’ are evoked like a praise poem (17) and throughout *Dart* Oswald uses onomatopoeia, neologisms and ever stranger imagery in her attempts to describe the water of the river:

will you rustle quietly and listen to what I have to say now
describing the wetbacks of stones golden-mouthed and
making no headway, will you unsilt

how water orders itself like a pack of geese goes up
first in tatters then in shreds then in threads
and shucking its pools crawls into this slate and thin limestone phase (15)

Here, the simile seems to be mixed – the water ‘orders itself like a pack’, perhaps suggesting a pack of cards; but instead it’s ‘a pack of geese’ which ‘goes up’ and disperses. The use of the odd collective noun is deliberately jarring, creating the impression that Oswald changed her mind halfway through the simile in her search for the right image, which then breaks apart into ‘tatters’, ‘shreds’ and ‘threads’. We can barely begin to ‘unsilt’ Oswald’s description of this part of the river, before the water moves on into another ‘phase’. Following this passage, the voice asks ‘will you translate for me blunt blink glint’, which is, of course, already a translation – an imperfect, linguistic representation of the sound (or perhaps the movement) of water (15). Throughout the poem, Oswald constantly draws attention to the limitations of descriptive language:

will somebody sing this riffle perfectly as the invisible river
sings it, quite different from this harsh primary
repertoire of murmurs, without any hardware

of stones and jointed sticks, one note
that rives apart the two worlds without any crossing (16)

For Oswald, her poem is a ‘harsh primary repertoire of murmurs’ that will never be able to describe ‘the invisible river’ – the infinitely complex forms of water. She seems to suggest that, no matter how close we come, we will always fall short in our attempts to describe this elusive ‘wobbly element’. Discussing the composition of *Dart*, she writes: ‘The river twice pointed out to me that water is greater than poetry. Ideally I’d create water, but I’ve had to make do with mimicking it – a rush of selves, a stronghold of other life-forms’ (Brown and Paterson 208).

Writing with total accuracy *about* water may prove impossible, but Oswald’s use of the songline affords her an alternative method, allowing her to write *with* water by replicating its movements and forms. In her research for *Dart*, Oswald drew on Theodor Schwenk’s study of the flowing forms of water and air, *Sensitive Chaos*²⁴. As well as influencing the content of the poem, Schwenk’s descriptions of the forms and movements of water can be seen to have influenced Oswald’s experimentation with the language and poetic form of *Dart*. In the first chapter of *Sensitive Chaos*, Schwenk writes:

Wherever water occurs it tends to take on a spherical form. It envelops the whole sphere of the earth, enclosing every object in a thin film. Falling as a drop, water oscillates about the shape of a sphere [...]. A sphere is a totality, a whole, and water will always attempt to form an organic whole by joining what is divided and uniting it in circulation. It is not possible to talk of the beginning or end of a circulatory system. Everything is inwardly connected and reciprocally related. Water is essentially the element of circulatory systems. If a living circulation is interrupted, a totality is broken into and the linear chain of cause and effect as an inorganic law is set in motion. (13)

In one of Oswald’s typically playful gestures, Schwenk appears as one of the voices in *Dart*, explaining this fundamental property of water, and providing an insight into Oswald’s use of poetic form. Just as water is always striving to attain the ‘total’, ‘whole’ spherical form, Oswald’s poem feels its way towards a coherent form as it follows the course of the river. However, as Schwenk points out, a river may meander, but never turn back on itself fully to complete the circle (*Sensitive Chaos* 13-14). The

²⁴ Oswald discussed this influence during a reading at the Exeter Poetry Festival on 7th October 2010. This influence becomes apparent in *Dart* when Schwenk appears as one of the ‘voices’ on p.20.

form of *Dart* acknowledges this, constantly slipping away from attaining a stable, 'whole' form. The poem moves through long and short lined verse, prose poetry, rhyming couplets, stanzas with repeated refrains and even the fixed forms of sonnets and ballads. Just when it appears to have achieved a stable form, the rhythm is interrupted and broken by another voice, setting off, in Schwenk's terms, another 'linear chain of cause and effect' – another small story about the relationship of the river and its inhabitants.

This ecomimetic use of form is apparent in Oswald's description of the confluence of the East and West Dart: 'a mob of waters [...] two wills gnarling and recoiling' but 'finally knuckling into balance [...] lying next to one another on the riverbed' (10-11). The equilibrium that the water achieves is echoed in Oswald's use of couplets. These couplets are employed right up to the point where the river starts 'wrangling away into this valley of oaks' (11). Then, the stable form is immediately broken, because, at the mention of oaks, the voice jumps into the prose poetry of the Forester: 'and here I am coop-felling in the valley' (11). Later, a rhymed sonnet about water abstraction is immediately interrupted by a free verse invocation of a ghost: 'Jan Coo! Jan Coo! / have you any idea what goes into water?' (25).

The overall form of the poem reflects the interplay of the circulating systems of water and the linear narratives of people. The interaction of voices and the river creates a kind of feedback loop – different human voices arrange the 'river's mutterings' into linear narratives that push the poem onwards, and, in turn, these voices and narratives are shaped by the movements of the river, which continually brings the poem back to considerations of the forms and properties of water. The Stonewaller's section is a good example of this. We are introduced to the Stonewaller where the river becomes an estuary, and he appears at the end of the narrative ballad of Brutus landing at Totnes. The Stonewaller's voice brings us to the present day and his narrative moves the poem down the estuary to where he collects his stones. However, while his narrative drives the poem forward, his movements are, in turn, guided by where the river deposits his walling stones. Near the end of his section, he says, 'I love this concept of drift, meaning driven, deposited by a current of air or water' (33). Here, he could be describing his stones, his voice, or, indeed, any of the voices in *Dart*.

Schwenk argues that people and water are intimately related, claiming that the movement of waves and vortices can be observed in the development and growth of almost all organic forms: 'We can see how the formative processes used by nature for its various creations are pictured in the first place as movements in the element of

water' (47). Extending this theory further, he describes how sensory perception, thought, and even language emerge from the flowing forms of air and fluids. Whatever the scientific basis for these claims, they find their way into Oswald's poem, providing a model for her playful explorations of the relationship between people, language and environment. For Schwenk, language emerges from the interaction of the body with the complex wave forms of air – it is created out of the physical relationship of body and its environment. Oswald takes this further in *Dart*, exploring how language, and especially poetry, can emerge from the physical interactions of people with their watery environment.

Throughout *Dart*, swimming is presented as a physical activity that allows for a particularly close linguistic interaction with the river. Oswald describes the Swimmer's movement through the water as follows:

S SSS W

Slooshing the Water open and

MMM

for it Meeting shut behind me (23)

The swimmer adds the 'I' of the subject to the 'S', 'W' and 'M' sounds of the water to complete the word 'SWIM'. Abandoning etymology, the verb emerges directly from sound and action, from the interaction of subject and environment. This passage not only questions the Cartesian mind/body dualism, but also the binary of signifier and signified that governs our understanding of language. This alternative view of language could be likened to the intuitive knowledge explored by John Burnside's swimmers. For Burnside, knowledge of our environment is shaped as much by our bodies as it is by our minds. Oswald goes a step further, though, suggesting that language itself is a product of our physical interactions with our environment.

Of course, Oswald is taking great liberties with language here, and any cynic would quickly point out that swimming does not actually produce the linguistic signifiers 'S', 'W' and 'M'. But does it matter that this doesn't really happen? That we don't actually swim the word 'swim'? Oswald's linguistic experimentation does not attempt to actually connect word with world, to attain perfect representative phrasing

and form; as we have already seen, she is aware that this is impossible. Instead, she uses the interaction of people with the border space of the river to play with and unsettle our assumptions about language and voice. She asks us to suspend our disbelief. If we are willing to believe in ghosts, giants and water nymphs, why not accept that language may function differently in this strange watery environment?

Oswald's play with language and voice is a means of exploring the instability and fluidity of the terms 'self' and 'environment'. When we first meet the ghost Jan Coo, we are told that he is wedded to the river:

Now he's the groom of the Dart – I've seen him
taking the shape of the sky, a bird, a blade,
a fallen leaf, a stone – may he lie long
in the inexplicable knot of the river's body (4)

In the same way that Jan Coo's voice intermingles with the songline of the river, his body is affected by the constant movement of water and becomes capable of changing form. Like Burnside's borders of the dwelling space, Oswald's river is a site of transformation and metamorphosis, where alternative, ecological understandings of the relationship between self and environment can be explored.

*

Oswald's training as a classicist would have alerted her to the significance of rivers in classical mythology; in particular the rivers of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which frequently occur as both the settings and protagonists of his stories of transformation. There are numerous references to the *Metamorphoses* throughout *Dart*. Oswald refers to Zeus and Proteus, a Water Nymph tells us of the myths of Hylas and Salmacis; while, more broadly, the whole poem evokes the Ovidian trope of transformation into and out of water.

Deryn Rees-Jones draws parallels between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Oswald's 'engagement with the provisionality of the self in relationship to nature' (237). The ecological view of the interrelationship of self and environment can be traced back to Ovid, as Charles Tomlinson writes in *Poetry and Metamorphosis*: 'the wisdom of *The Metamorphoses* inheres in it an imaginative vision of a world where all things are interrelated, where flesh and blood are near kin to soil and river, where man and

animal share common instincts' (2)²⁵. While the influence of the *Metamorphoses* is clear in *Dart*, I would like to highlight an important difference in the way that transformation functions in Oswald's poetry compared to the Ovidian tradition.

In his introduction to *Tales from Ovid*, Ted Hughes writes that Ovid's metamorphoses stem from 'passion': 'Not just ordinary passion either, but human passion *in extremis* – passion where it combusts, or levitates, or mutates into an experience of the supernatural' (ix). Instances of transformation in Hughes' own poetry (outside of his translations of Ovid) follow this model, or else are figured in terms of the psychologically and physically painful rituals of shamanic traditions²⁶. For both Hughes and Ovid 'the act of metamorphosis [...] operates as a symbolic guarantee that the passion has become mythic, has achieved the unendurable intensity that lifts the whole episode onto the supernatural or divine plane' (*Tales from Ovid* x). Oswald, however, differentiates her poetry from this tradition by exploring, instead, how transformation can be seen as a much quieter, everyday event. Indeed, she presents the transformations that occur in *Dart* as simply another aspect of her 'working account' of the river. Throughout the poem, we see 'medics, milkmen, policemen, millionaires' become fishermen; tin miners and swimmers become ghosts; and everyone become a part of the river through the intermingling of their voices with the 'river's mutterings'. Some of these transformations are real, others figurative, but they are all presented as frequent occurrences for the people who live and work alongside the Dart.

Oswald's presentation of transformations as everyday events that could happen to anyone, chimes with John Burnside's metamorphic poetry. For both poets, transformations occur when a person approaches or crosses a border space. The change is not caused by 'human passion', but rather by the person's environment altering their sense of self. The agencies that cause the transformations are ecocentric, not anthropocentric; therefore, *anyone*, in any state of mind, approaching or crossing a border space has the potential to be transformed.

As in Burnside's poetry, Oswald shows that there are very real dangers associated with the interplay of self and environment. The characters in *Dart* whose voices are closest to the river's are those, like Jan Coe, who are dead. The poem echoes with the voices of people who have died in the river – people who went swimming or poaching in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Canoeist's section brings this sense

²⁵ For more information on re-writings of Ovid in British poetry see Sarah Annes Brown *The Metamorphosis of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes*.

²⁶ Hughes discusses this in Faas *The Unaccommodated Universe* 197-215. See also Bassnett *Ted Hughes* 32-47.

of danger to the fore. The river's assertion that 'I can outcanoevre you' is often quoted as an example of Oswald's playful humour (15)²⁷. And it is funny, but darkly so for anyone who has actually been 'outcanoevred' by a river. After the river's request for the canoeist to put his head 'into the smallest small where it moils up / and masses under the sloosh gates', the seemingly romantic invitation to 'swim down and attend to this foundry of sounds // this jabber of pidgin-river' has something of the dark humour of Hannibal Lecter asking a friend round 'for dinner' (15).

Oswald's use of humour marks a significant difference between her work and Burnside's. Where Burnside presents death as a human tragedy, in *Dart*, death is figured as just another stage in the interplay of self and environment seen at an ecological scale. It is another everyday transformation. The drowning of the Tin Miners or Jan Coo are just further examples of the ways in which a person can be altered by their environment, and of the ways that self, voice and landscape intermingle in the songline of the river. Oswald's humorous, matter-of-fact take on death suggests a more objectively ecocentric perspective than Burnside's poems, which often bring us back to a very anthropocentric understanding of death as loss and tragedy. Measured against the vast spatial and temporal scales of the river, which has been slowly wearing away the same valleys for thousands of years, human lives are nothing more than 'tiny spasms of time cross-fixed into water' (46).

This ecocentric view of death marks a significant development in the way that metamorphosis traditionally functions in poetry. Discussing metamorphic poetry in the Ovidian tradition, Tomlinson states that 'the fact of metamorphosis [...] is so often haunted by a nakedly human imagining of what death is like, and by the reluctance of the body to become a *thing*' (14). In Oswald's poetry, becoming a 'thing' – a stone, leaf, tree or river – doesn't seem to be a problem. There is a similarity here with Clark's adaptation of Olson's 'Objectism'. Both poets show the importance of viewing humans on a par with 'those other creatures of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects' (Olson 24). However, while Clark chooses to infer these connections through his use of silences and space, Oswald plays with the 'thingness' of people directly, through her use of voice. The loss of human selfhood alters, but does not mark the end of, the characters in *Dart*. Since their selves were already defined by their environment, the dead continue to exist and, more importantly, to speak.

Tomlinson identifies the loss of voice as a common accompaniment to Ovidian metamorphosis: 'In story after story, as the poet sings on, human voices plunge or falter

²⁷ See Sutherland-Smith, 'Water Musics' 74.

into animality, wishfully, or sometimes because their human nature [...] has been taken over by a sub-human trait of character' (14). This loss of voice is evident in the myths of Lycaeon, Actaeon, Philomela, Daphne and many others. In *Dart*, however, voice continues beyond the moment of metamorphosis. When John Edmunds drowns and becomes a part of the river he loses his human voice, but can still 'move you a few known sounds / in a constant irregular pattern' (21). Following the logic of Oswald's poetics, if voice is a product of the interaction of people and their environment, then it will still exist, in part, once the human aspect of it is gone. A respectful silence follows John Edmund's demise, but only 'maybe eighty seconds' before his voice is resurrected in the form of a modern-day swimmer (21). *Dart* enacts the continuity of voice as it moves through ghosts, ancient giants and oak trees. Sentences begun by the living are finished by the dead. Throughout *Dart*, the river is a border where different landscapes, different forms, and past and present events all meet and intermingle. The only constant, linking all of these things at an appropriately vast, ecological scale, is the river's voice, which spans geographies, histories, lives and deaths.

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Oswald's attempt to evoke the 'river's mutterings' – a voice that functions at more-than-human, ecological scales – echoes Aldo Leopold's famous claim that to understand our environment, and our place in it, we must learn to 'think like a mountain'. In *A Sand County Almanac*, a book that became a landmark for the American conservation movement, Leopold describes the dangers that arise when we fail to think about our environment at an ecological scale. He explains the concept of 'thinking like a mountain' through a critique of the flawed logic of wolf culling. In Leopold's home state of Arizona, extensive wolf-culling resulted in a surplus of grazing animals, the overconsumption of grass and shrubs, and the eventual breakdown of the sustainable ecosystem. Leopold writes that 'the cowman who cleans his range of wolves does not realize that he is taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. He has not learned to think like a mountain. Hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea' (132). The cowman viewed his environment at an oversimplified, human scale: less wolves = more cows. Leopold suggests that if we want to live sustainably in our environment, we need to think at much more complex ecological scales. By subsuming human voices into the 'river's mutterings', Oswald attempts to connect human and ecological scales. By 'singing like a river' she attempts to 'think

like a mountain' and engage in a reconsideration of the ecosystem of the Dart in more-than-human terms.

The dustbowls of Arizona may seem a far cry from the river Dart in Devon. However, the landscape surrounding the Dart has been similarly affected by human activity. In her marginal notes, Oswald point out that 'Dart is old Devonian for oak', alerting the reader to the fact that Dartmoor was once an oak forest ecosystem before it was destroyed by early agriculture (11). Although conservationist concerns do not appear overtly in Oswald's poetry, they are intrinsically linked to her overall poetics, as she showed in her Ted Hughes Memorial Lecture in 2005:

We have a problem with our fields, with our weather, with our water, with the very air we breathe; but we can't quite react, we can't quite get our minds in gear. One reason perhaps is that our minds are conditioned by the wrong kind of nature poem, the kind that leaves us comfortable, melancholy, inert. Nostalgic. Dishonest. ('Wild Things')

In the context of Oswald's poetic concerns in *Dart*, the 'wrong kind of nature poem' can be seen as one that only functions on human scales, presenting our environment as nothing more than an extension of human psychology or a reflection of human emotion. Oswald's use of the word 'dishonest' is strikingly apt, because environmental poetry that makes no effort to challenge or move beyond an anthropocentric view *is* dishonest, in that it implicitly serves to conceal the vast range of non-human agencies that shape our environment and our own identities. The 'right' kind of poem would be one that alerts us to these non-human, more-than-human agencies and attempts to provide an insight into the scales at which they function. The 'right' kind of poem would explore both anthropocentric and ecocentric systems of meaning through a focus on the complex interconnection of humans, animals and their environment.

Throughout *Dart*, Oswald shows a concern for the negative impact of anthropocentric systems on the river and its wider environment. The environmental impact of a Woollen Mill, a Dairy and a Sewage Works are all described in matter of fact prose: 'I measure the intake through a flume and if there's too much, I waste it off down the stormflow, it's not my problem. [...] Not much that I can do' (30). Oswald does not make any judgements about this sewage worker's practice, which may seem surprising given her comments above. However, rather than making judgements at an individual level, Oswald is more interested in engaging with the bigger picture of how

people and river interact at more-than-human, ecological scales. The Sewage Worker describes his job in these terms: 'I'm in charge as far as Dartmoor, the metabolism of the whole South West, starting with clouds and flushing down through buildings and bodies into this underground grid of pipes, all ending up with me here on my bridge' (30). By taking this large-scale view, Oswald implicates wider society (including the reader) in the Sewage Worker's actions. Seen at this scale, people become stages in the water cycle; their relationship with their environment becomes figured in terms of units of waste, building to an inevitable overflow. Making her readers think of themselves in these terms does much more for Oswald's promotion of environmental concerns than any judgement she could pass on this individual sewage worker's actions.

While Oswald 'thinks like a mountain' by describing human life at more-than-human scales, she goes significantly further than Leopold by attempting to give voice to the ecological, non-human thoughts of the river. The political and ethical importance of trying to give voice to the non-human world is explored by Christopher Manes in his essay 'Nature and Silence'. Manes writes:

we require a viable environmental ethics to confront the silence of nature in our contemporary regime of thought, for it is within this vast eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished. (16)

He proposes, as an alternative to this silence, 'a language free from obsession with human pre-eminence and reflecting the ontological humility implicit in evolutionary theory, ecological science, and postmodern thought' (25). Here, Manes could be describing Oswald's poetic language in *Dart*. Oswald shows 'ontological humility' in her acknowledgement of the impossibility of perfectly representing water; but, at the same time, she draws on people's lived, experiential knowledge of the river to create her ecocentric voice. This knowledge is imparted in fragments: we hear the Naturalist's ecological descriptions of the river's wildlife, we are given a breakdown of the mineral content of the riverbed and we learn about the conservation techniques of the Forester. In a gesture in tune with Critical Realist philosophy, Oswald's *Dart* suggests that, although we cannot know everything about our environment, we can build on what partial, local knowledge we do have to attain a deeper understanding of place. Oswald's poetry may not be able to represent the essence of water, but by building on the specific, detailed knowledge that her 'voices' possess, she is able to work towards a voice that is

‘free from obsession with human pre-eminence’ and can represent the river on its own terms.

However, the attempt to ‘think like a mountain’ or ‘sing like a river’ still raises some important problems. How can we give voice to the non-human world without simply imposing our own voice on it? How can we ‘think like a mountain’ without reconfiguring the scale of such ‘thought’ in human terms? While Oswald states that ‘all voices should be read as the river’s mutterings’, it seems convenient that the river would decide to speak not just in a recognisably human language, but in English. The ‘river’ itself acknowledges this problem:

the way I talk in my many-headed turbulence
among these modulations, this nimbus of words kept in motion
sing-calling something definitely human (16)

Again, Oswald draws attention to the limitations, and anthropocentric nature, of language, suggesting that any attempt to give voice to the river would necessarily rely on anthropomorphism. The charge of anthropomorphism is often levelled as a criticism, but Oswald’s attempt to sing like a river raises the important issue of the *value* of this technique in environmental writing.

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* Timothy Clark suggests that the problems commonly associated with anthropomorphism are ‘related to what may be the inherently anthropocentric nature of human language, projecting as it does a world usually understood according to our own scale, dimensions, interests and desires’ (192). However, he goes on to argue that ‘language that may seem problematically figurative or “merely anthropomorphic” can also acquire provocative value as a way of doing justice to the agency of the non-human’ (192). Oswald’s anthropomorphism of the river confers this ‘provocative value’ on her poem. The ‘river’s’ perspective on human life and death may be written in English, but it is devoid of recognisably human sentiment. Similarly, the notion of voice as an emergent property of the interaction of people and place diverges from an anthropocentric understanding of language. Throughout the poem, Oswald’s creative use of anthropomorphism forces us to think outside of ‘our own scale, dimensions, interests and desires’. Timothy Clark writes that ‘the issue of ‘anthropomorphism’, positioned on the hazy borderlines between human and non-human, can become a powerful tool for questioning the complacency of dominant human self-conceptions’ (192). It is fitting

that Oswald employs this ‘tool’ in her exploration of the river as a border where human and non-human voices meet. Her evocation of the more-than-human voice of the river may always be limited by the anthropocentric nature of language, but it can still destabilise and force us to question our ‘dominant human self-conceptions’.

Oswald has described *Dart* as a search for ‘a language more opaque and fluid, fragmented, haphazard, instant, inspoken and breath-sensitive than is possible’ (Brown and Paterson 209). It is a search for an ecocentric language, a voice that allows the river to speak on its own terms, which is, as Oswald acknowledges, an impossibility. Language cannot transcend human, cultural frames of reference; but Oswald’s use of anthropomorphism and her attempt to ‘sing like a river’ allows her to explore human concerns and human language at more-than-human, ecological scales.

Certain Uncertainties: Richard Caddel's *Writing in the Dark*

Like Thomas A. Clark, Richard Caddel was a poet whose deep concern for environmental issues did not sit easily with his categorisation within the tradition of postmodern, 'experimental' poetry. On top of this, his criticism of 'high-street' poetry and his uncompromisingly 'difficult' style meant that he only published through small presses and, consequently, his work never reached a large audience²⁸. Caddel's early death from leukaemia in 2003 has meant that his environmental poetics has not received the recent critical attention afforded to other poets writing out of similar traditions. In 2000, Caddel was one of the poets discussed in an essay by Harriet Tarlo on 'Radical Landscape' poetry, yet his work did not feature in her recent anthology, *The Ground Aslant*. Since Tarlo's essay, the only other criticism of Caddel's poetry has appeared in a 'Richard Caddel Memorial Issue' of the online magazine *Jacket* and an article by Meredith Quartermain in the 2004-2005 issue of the journal *Ecopoetics*. As we reach the tenth anniversary of his death, critical appreciation of Caddel's work is in need of a revival.

In his 'Obituary Notice' for Caddel, Harry Gilonis wrote: 'That he was not better known is perhaps due to a predilection for 'edges', those areas marginalised by geography, commerce or choice' (jacketmagazine.com). Caddel's 'predilection for edges' can be seen throughout his poetry, but it is particularly emphasised in his last, posthumously published, collection *Writing in the Dark*. In this collection, all of the poems are written from the marginalised perspective of the poet sitting alone, outside, as day turns to night. The border between day and night, light and darkness, is evoked as a site where the human concepts of love, friendship, belonging and death can be explored at more-than-human, ecological scales. Throughout the collection, darkness becomes symbolic of human limitations, uncertainty and lack of knowledge; yet, conversely, it is also presented as a source of creativity. Indeed, the darkness of Caddel's environment provided the direct inspiration for the poems, as he explains in his foreword: 'Some (rare) fine evenings in England, and others in Japan, together with a hand-held Psion²⁹ with a backlit screen, enabled me to sit out late and make the initial notes for these poems literally in the dark' (7). The main aim of this chapter is to investigate how Caddel uses the limitations of his immediate creative environment, and

²⁸ See Caddel 'Making the Words Dance'.

²⁹ An electronic personal organiser.

the uncertainty of the dark, to explore beyond the boundaries of anthropocentric thought.

In 'Making the Words Dance,' a statement on his poetics, Caddel wrote that 'borders' and 'environment' were two of his main 'on-going interests' (99). I will contextualise Caddel's exploration of the border between day and night in relation to what he called his 'borders project' – the ongoing focus on borders, boundaries and margins that can be seen throughout his oeuvre. Another important, on-going theme that can be traced throughout Caddel's writing, is his focus on music and sound. This focus is particularly pertinent to *Writing in the Dark* because the darkness of Caddel's immediate environment, while he was actually composing the poems, leads to a heightened attention to aural detail. I will discuss how the focus on sound in his last collection was influenced by his earlier work and the techniques learned from his mentor Basil Bunting. Drawing on Harriet Tarlo's discussion of the music of Caddel's poetry, I will examine how Caddel's use of musical forms aids in his attempts to represent a complex, ecological view of his environment.

The border between day and night is significantly different from the borders explored by the poets already discussed in this thesis. Burnside's edges of the dwelling space, Clark's coastlines and mountain ranges, and Oswald's river, are all spatial borders. In contrast, the border between day and night is temporal. Where Burnside, Oswald and Clark explore border *spaces*, Caddel focuses on a border *time*. The hours of dusk provide Caddel with a specific time-frame within which he can explore the temporality of human life in relation to more-than-human timescales.

Writing in the Dark was written in the last years of Caddel's life, when he had been diagnosed with leukaemia; as such, his concern for human temporality takes on a very personal significance. However, rather than leading to introspection, Caddel's illness shifted his focus outwards, to the interconnection of the self and its environment. While the themes of darkness and uncertainty about the future are understandably worrying for Caddel, they are also presented as life-affirming, creative concepts that are essential to understanding our place in the world.

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In the first chapter of *Findings*, entitled 'Darkness and Light,' Kathleen Jamie offers a defence of darkness as a positive, creative force. 'Pity the dark' she writes, 'we're so concerned to overcome and banish it, it's crammed full of all that's devilish, like some

grim cupboard under the stair. But dark is good' (3). Caddel certainly shared this view. The positive aspects of darkness are celebrated throughout *Writing in the Dark*, particularly in 'Little Black Book of Dark Things', which reads like a praise poem:

Dark wet earth
with plants rooting

in it / Dark space
around a jackdaw's

eye [...]

Mind's darkness
where no thought

comes / Bat
flying across

moon, its dark
shape (32)

The poem is composed from a list of images, sounds and feelings that emerge out of darkness. Even seemingly negative connotations, like the 'mind's darkness,' are included, because the mind must be dark and empty of thought if it is to notice something as fleeting as a 'bat flying across [the] moon'. This poem demonstrates Caddel's commitment to celebrating the positive, creative aspects of darkness. It suggests that Caddel's fascination with the dark stems from not knowing what will appear. The night engenders feelings of uncertainty, but it is also a time of creative potentiality, like the 'dark wet earth' that plants take root in. In this poem, the shared property of 'darkness' connects the human mind with jackdaws and bats, the 'dark hearts / of scarlet poppies' and 'trees // thrown dark / by wind' (32-3). Throughout the collection, the night becomes a time when stable systems of thought and categorisation break down, and the self can be defined in relation to its environment.

In his attempts to define the self in more-than-human terms, Caddel draws on an ancient fascination with the border between day and night – a border where human life

can be measured against the timescales of the planets and stars. In *Findings*, Jamie travels to Orkney to experience dusk on the winter solstice in the Neolithic tomb of Maes Howe. She imagines Maes Howe as a kind of physical metaphor connecting darkness and death: ‘the tomb-builders had constructed their cairn to admit a single beam of solstice light: it was the bending of a natural phenomenon to a human end’ (23). However, while the stonework of the tomb renders the mid-winter darkness meaningful in human terms, this metaphor also makes human death meaningful at the sidereal scale of the solstices. Jamie writes that visiting such ancient sites ‘re-calibrates your sense of time’ (11). The craftsmanship of Maes Howe draws attention to the movement of the earth and stars in such a way that witnessing the solstice sunset there, forces a reconsideration of human life in relation to the more-than-human timescales of these celestial movements. Caddel’s *Writing in the Dark* could be read as working towards a similar reconsideration. By marking the passage from day to night over a period of years, Caddel’s poems explore the temporality of human existence in relation to non-human and more-than-human timescales. In the first sequence of the collection, he writes:

light goes, it does, *now*, so
stars show, us under them,
breathing, apart, blessed (9)

The moment when light disappears and stars ‘show’, heightens our awareness of ‘us under them / breathing’. Caddel’s use of seven commas in these three short lines draws our attention, when reading the passage aloud, to the rhythm of our breathing, which the poem contextualises in relation to the rhythm of day turning to night. Caddel mentions ‘breath’ on numerous occasions throughout the collection, employing it as a continuous measure by which the temporality of human life can be related to more-than-human timescales.

Sitting outside, listening and watching the dark, engenders in Caddel a heightened sense of how the rhythms of the human body can be understood at diverse non-human scales. In the same sequence, Caddel feels his smile ‘jumping in planetary / time’; then later, at the other end of the spectrum, he sees snail trails as his own ‘heart-trails [...] alone / shining hard / beating’ (10, 19). Snails may represent an even shorter temporal existence than humans, but Caddel shows that these much smaller scales of being can still point towards more-than-human knowledge. In ‘Lighter’ he writes:

By starlight on a clear night
insects sing, a music apart
on margins we thrill to. Leaving
presents we can't leave. Kind. (14)

The insects' 'music' represents a way of being at home in the dark; but it is 'a music apart', a way of being that we can never fully comprehend. For Caddel, the details of his night-time environment continually remind him of his limitations; even the light-giving stars that help him to see, remain 'bright // and old / and beyond / knowing' (36).

Throughout his collection, Caddel searches for ways in which he can begin to understand these aspects of the night that are 'beyond knowing'.

Caddel's description of the insects 'leaving presents' links his poetry with that of John Burnside and Thomas A. Clark, both of whom explore the importance of viewing the world as a 'gift'. In an interview with David Herd, Clark explains how his poetry responds to the idea of the 'initial gift' of the world: 'We can choose either to examine that gift, working out the best angles, grabbing as much of it as we can for ourselves; or we accept it simply as a gift, and the moment of acceptance seems to me one of great import and at the same time of lightness' ('Making Spaces'). This philosophy of acceptance is clear in Clark's close attention to the 'lovely particulars' of his immediate environment and his quiet, non-deterministic poetry. For Clark, accepting the world as a gift does not necessitate absolute knowledge; instead, his philosophy of acceptance allows for an appreciation of uncertainty, incomplete knowledge and the borders separating humans from a total understanding of their environment.

John Burnside explores these ideas in the sequence 'Gift Songs'. In 'Varieties of Religious Experience' he describes his relationship with the mice that share his home:

I like it
that I have
such neighbours
– not
invisible
but moving back and forth
between their world
and mine

discreetly (*Gift Songs* 32)

Burnside is aware that he can never fully understand ‘their world’, but by leaving gifts of food – ‘crusts and pine nuts [...] milk and berries’ (32) – and accepting the visitations of the mice as gifts, he is able to gain a deeper understanding of his place in the world:

how a man might
prosper
if he dared
making himself at home
without a sound (33)

By accepting his lack of knowledge and the otherness of the mice, Burnside gains an understanding of the human concept of home at more-than-human scales. In Caddel’s poetry, too, this philosophy of acceptance is evident in the way that he celebrates the details of his night-time environment. Throughout *Writing in the Dark*, accepting the darkness as a gift transforms Caddel’s feelings of uncertainty and incomplete knowledge into the potential for creativity and deeper understandings of his place in the world.

*

The concept of borders as sites of uncertainty is central to Caddel’s overall ‘borders project’. However, where *Writing in the Dark* explores the positive creative potential of this uncertainty, Caddel’s earlier work is more concerned with the negative aspects of uncertainty associated with culturally-defined borders. The sequence ‘Border Ballads’ (first published as a pamphlet in 1995) explores the ‘Borders’ of Northumbria as sites of instability and linguistic breakdown. In the first poem in the sequence, ‘Littoral,’ Caddel writes:

down by the shoreline
I lost all my language
deep in the margins
my words deserted me

speech became a stranger
and waves closed behind us
and home had no meaning
and mist obscured our passage
and day was dark as night (*Magpie Words* 30)

Far from the centres of civilisation, these borders are evoked as spaces where language and stable systems of thought break down. In the section entitled ‘Ghost Dance’, this figurative loss of language becomes literal – the poem is composed from a list of endangered or extinct languages: ‘cornish livonian seminole creek’ (32). In this poem, the borders of the ‘civilised’ world acquire even more negative connotations, as sites where marginalised, local languages are displaced by dominant, centralised discourses.

As ‘Ghost Dance’ suggests, while Caddel’s ‘Border Ballads’ were primarily inspired by the local Northumbrian poetic tradition and landscape, his overall borders project drew on influences from further afield. In the late eighties, Caddel took over the running of Durham University Library’s European Documentation Centre, a move which led to his increased contact with poets across Europe. He developed particularly close connections with poets from Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, travelling to various countries to perform readings, as well as translating their work, and having his own work translated, into several languages. In his ‘Memoir’ of Caddel, Tony Baker writes:

It’s not by accident that his work has been translated, not into the more likely European languages, but principally into Czech, Estonian, Lithuanian, Polish and Dutch, regions either linguistically enclosed by more dominant tongues or sited on the frontier between an east and a west where local cultures have a long history of vulnerability to distant, dominant forces. (jacketmagazine.com)

The similarities between Northumbria and the small Eastern European states that gained independence at the end of the Cold War were not lost on Caddel. When writing his borders project, he drew inspiration from across these marginalised localities, charting links between otherwise disparate landscapes and cultures³⁰.

³⁰ See especially ‘For Kosovo: After Alcuin on the Sacking of Lindisfarne’ (*Magpie Words* 52-3) in which Caddel connects the pillaging of Lindisfarne with the atrocities of the Balkans conflict.

Unlike *Writing in the Dark*, Caddel's earlier poetry was primarily concerned with man-made, cultural borders; in particular, the way that these borders were arbitrarily defined, and people arbitrarily marginalised, by national and international political discourses. In his critique of post-Cold War politics, Caddel was heavily influenced by his friend, the Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski, who, in the late eighties, identified what he called the 'The Wandering Border'. Kaplinski developed this idea in a poetry collection of the same name, the first poem of which begins:

The East-West border is always wandering,
sometimes eastward, sometimes west,
and we do not know exactly where it is just now:
in Gaugamela, in the Urals, or maybe in ourselves,
so that one ear, one eye, one nostril, one hand, one foot,
one lung and one testicle or one ovary
is on the one, another on the other side. (*Selected Poems* 74)

Kaplinski's 'Wandering Border' is a commentary on the arbitrary nature of national identity in the Baltics, where, in the twentieth century alone, the Estonians could be a part of the Russian Empire (in the East), the Third Reich (in the West) and the USSR (in the East), before finally attaining independence and membership of the global free market (in the West). The poem concludes that 'the mouth doesn't know on behalf of which or both / it has to speak' (74). Kaplinski portrays a confused view of the self, defined at the scales of national and international politics. The nation state, which should be a stable, meaningful concept, is shown to be fleeting and arbitrary. All the subject of the poem would need to do to change their official identity, is shift a nostril or testicle a few inches to the left or right.

Caddel responds to the syndrome of 'The Wandering Border' in his sequence 'The Baltic Coast'. In 'Baltic Coast V: Who are the Real Estonians?' Caddel explores the effect of dominant discourses shifting from (Eastern) Communist to (Western) Capitalist, following the fall of the Soviet Union:

I've failed my language and ideology test
I probably sing and dance too much

soon my mental workforce will be halved

in line with western economies (*Magpie Words* 27)

Accompanying this mental, ideological takeover of the self are the physical effects of new industries on the environment. 'Baltic Coast II: Gulf' describes 'maps with boatways / altered made wrong and / waste slick pumped to sick sea' (25). The same political discourses that arbitrarily defined Kaplinski's wandering border, are shown here to misrepresent the workings of the sea and sanction environmental degradation. At the same time, the replacement of local language and knowledge by globalised, Western discourses, leads to the inability of the inhabitants of the Baltic coast to relate to the world around them. In the 'Coda' of the sequence Caddel writes:

because you won't
hang out a witch charm
the skies will become
neither blue nor grey

amber! amber and charred
sticks on that shore
whose seas have lost their clarity
for ever (29)

This apocalyptic vision reflects the instability and breakdown of meaning that occurs when we define our environment solely at the anthropocentric scales of national politics. Throughout 'The Baltic Coast', Caddel explores the negative feelings of uncertainty associated with 'wandering borders' that bear no relation to the landscape they define. Unlike the creative uncertainty of darkness in *Writing in the Dark*, which provides glimpses of the self at ecological scales, the uncertainty of 'the wandering border' leads to the fundamental disconnection of self and environment, as people become defined purely in anthropocentric terms.

When faced with endlessly 'wandering' national borders, the only meaningful frame of reference for defining the Estonian's relationship with their environment is the Baltic coast itself. Furthermore, Caddel suggests that the only way that this border can be meaningful is if it is represented in a language that has grown out of the close relationship of people and their local environment. Caddel laments the disappearance of these very languages in 'The Ghost Dance', but the first poem of 'The Baltic Coast'

suggests that traces of them may still exist. ‘Baltic Coast I: Vaim’ begins: ‘very simple: you / mishear *coast* // for *soul* from which / we strike out // each morning’ (24).

Playing with the dual meaning of the Estonian word ‘vaim’, which can mean both a ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ and the ‘atmosphere’ of a place or thing, Caddel neatly enacts the link between self and environment that local languages can forge. This mishearing provides a creative spark from which Caddel can ‘strike out’ into an understanding of the self as something defined at the more-than-human scales of the Baltic landscape.

In parts of ‘The Baltic Coast,’ then, we can see Caddel beginning to explore the kind of creative uncertainty that becomes the driving force of *Writing in the Dark* – an uncertainty that can only be explored alongside borders that are meaningful in both anthropocentric and ecocentric terms. Unlike the ‘wandering borders’ of nation states, both the Baltic coast and the temporal border between day and night are constant features of our environment. In Garry Potter’s words, they are borders that are ‘always meaningful’ to us, both culturally and ecologically, representing our limits as land-dwelling, diurnal organisms. Where national borders are shown to be arbitrary and fleeting, these borders provide sites of stability and certainty for us as human beings. These certainties provide a stable base from which Caddel can ‘strike out’ and explore the uncertainties of more-than-human scales of thought and being.

*

The attempt to harness the creative potential of uncertainty is fundamental to *Writing in the Dark*. In an interview with Anthony Flowers, Caddel explains that ‘deliberately it’s a project which is open-ended, responsive to circumstance, and doesn’t know where it’s going. It’s “in the dark”’ (*Quiet Music* 36). Peter Quartermain argues that this desire to avoid closure and deterministic thought can be seen throughout Caddel’s *Selected Poems*, which all display ‘the urgency to keep the territory open, to avoid the stifling arrogance of *knowing* that carries closure in its wake’ (jacketmagazine.com). However, keeping the ‘territory open’ and avoiding the certainty of ‘knowing’ poses problems in terms of creative practice. How does Caddel avoid deterministic meaning, whilst still ensuring that his poems mean *something*?

While interviewing Caddel, Anthony Flowers comments that Caddel’s poetry may be read in light of Thomas A. Clark’s view of meaning as ‘a place to arrive at, or something that might come, in its own good time’ (*Quiet Music* 27). Fittingly, Caddel supports this view with an analogy about walking: ‘Hikers don’t have a problem with

this: they do the walks, cover the stony ground and twist their ankles, and still lap up the whole journey: the view, the smells, the ankle pain... *au fin*, we're interpretive beings' (27). This analogy compares both writing and reading a poem to experiencing every detail of a journey on foot – taking in all aspects of the journey rather than looking towards a definitive end-point. These ideas fed directly into Caddel's particular method of composition, which he called 'Triangulation':

You take a view from one angle, then a different one, then you find a way of interlocking them, morticing them, and a new thing emerges which is enlarged by, or confirmed by, or at least different to the materials of the initial viewpoints. Since we're talking about places here, and placing is important in all my work, let's call it *Triangulation*, why don't we. (*Quiet Music* 20)

The practice of 'triangulation' can be seen throughout *Writing in the Dark*. Many of the poems are presented as collections of individual sensations or perceptions, 'triangulating' around the overall theme of darkness. The sequence 'Nightgarden Songs' connects the circular, shining forms of moons, snails and ponds, using them to suggest the interconnection of scales that Caddel experiences at night. In 'Song of Small Things at Night', Caddel creates an image of the approaching dawn out of the 'silence of bees,' the scents of herbs and the sounds of 'blackbirdnightsongs'. Caddel conjures his environment, elliptically, out of the silences, absences and incomplete experiences offered by the night.

These sequences could be compared to Thomas A. Clark's poetry, both in their use of the short form and their attentiveness to the details, or 'particulars,' of the specific environment to hand. However, where Clark's poems rely, primarily, on visual detail, Caddel is much more interested in exploring the sound of his environment. In 'Nightgarden Songs' he writes:

hear water
falling on
water's surface

at night –
sound, pattern
displaces, places

resolve
itself
by moonlight (21)

The darkness of Caddel's environment means that sight is both partial and fleeting – reliant on the cycles of the moon or the absence of cloud. The practice of writing in the dark, then, necessitates a focus on aural rather than visual detail. As such, many of the most vivid images in *Writing in the Dark* are created synaesthetically, out of sound. In 'Songs of Small Things at Night' Caddel describes both seeing and hearing 'trains on rail / track // hobble / towards / dawn', while 'bird // song / shines from / each tree' (30). Throughout the collection, Caddel combines a focus on music and sound with his 'triangulation' method to create poetry that reflects the creative potential of the dark. In 'Roller' he writes: 'Stars / over us, we hear that / music apart and wonder' (23). For Caddel, representing 'that music apart' – the sounds of the night – is central to his understanding of the self in relation to more-than-human temporal scales.

*

As with his concern for borders, Caddel's intense focus on the music and sound of poetry can be traced back throughout his oeuvre. In 'Making the Words Dance', he writes that 'poetry – the sound, the crunch of language, and the dance of vowels and consonants – is a great continuing adventure for me' (104). Music was always an important aspect of Caddel's life – he played the viola and originally studied music at university – but the specific attraction of music for him, as a poet, was the way in which it could cross linguistic and cultural borders. When he was translating poetry from modern languages or Old Welsh, he would take great liberties with the meaning, but always remain faithful to the music of the original³¹. He was particularly interested in combining musical forms from different traditions, as can be seen in his playfully titled poem 'The Feet of Dafydd ap Gwilym Tapping to the Triads of Dr Williams', which fuses Welsh lyricism with the short imagistic poems of William Carlos Williams. Caddel's playful attitude towards music is neatly summed up by his deliberate

³¹ He discusses this in *Quiet Music of Words* 31-2. See also, his phonic translation of Aneirin's *Y Gododdin*, 'For the Fallen: Part II' (*Magpie Words* 68-79).

misquoting of Williams in 'Larksong Signal': 'no ideas but in tunes' (*Magpie Words* 102).

American modernist techniques pervade Caddel's poetry. Like Thomas A. Clark, he was influenced early in his writing life by the 'open field' poetics of the Black Mountain School. His shorter poems have been likened to Robert Creeley's and *Writing in the Dark* pays homage to Robert Duncan's *Ground Work II: In the Dark*³². However, the most enduring influence on the music of his poetry was undoubtedly the tutelage of Basil Bunting. It was his meeting with Bunting while studying at Newcastle University that convinced Caddel to switch his degree from music to English Literature and take up poetry seriously. Speaking about Bunting's influence, Caddel says: 'it never really occurred to me to wonder what poetry sounded like out loud, or to imagine that poetry and music were in any way connected, until I came to Newcastle, went to a few poetry readings, and met Bunting' (*Flowers* 6). Bunting became such an important influence that Caddel went on to become director of the Basil Bunting Poetry Centre and was instrumental in reviving the readership of Bunting's work. In his introduction to Bunting's *Complete Poems*, Caddel praises Bunting's intense focus on sound, which distinguished him from his modernist contemporaries and led to his popularity with a younger generation of poets³³. Caddel was clearly influenced by Bunting's view that 'the fundamental thing in poetry is the sound' ('Three Other Comments' 44). Indeed, the primacy of sound was the guiding principle of Caddel's creative practice and resulted in his notoriously 'difficult' style, which he vigorously defended in 'Making the Words Dance':

It's been my experience that most worthwhile things in life do involve an element of difficulty. I'm damned if I'll kowtow to the general tellytubby consumer culture we have pressed on us which suggests that if you have to chew it, it ain't food. [...] I think that most of the supposed difficulties in poetry are caused by people who just aren't used to listening. "Stand up and use your ears, like a man" quoth Charles Ives to one of his critics. (101)

This view echoes Bunting's assertion that making meaning 'is not poetry's business' ('The Poet's Point of View' 42). In the same statement on poetry, Bunting writes: 'if

³² See Peter Quartermain's 'Review of *Magpie Words*'.

³³ See Bunting *Complete Poems* 10-13. Caddel has also written about the influence of Bunting's reading style on a younger generation of British poets in 'Frankly on the Air: A Consideration of Bunting's Readings'.

you insist on misusing words, its “meaning” is of another kind, and lies in the relation to one another of lines and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and clashing, which the hearer feels rather than understands’ (42). Caddel explores this alternative view of ‘meaning’ through a focus on prosody that can be heard throughout his oeuvre. In *Writing in the Dark*, however, he developed this idea by exploring the ways in which the sounds of the night could directly influence his creative practice, driving the patterns of his thoughts and generating the imagery of his poems. In ‘Oystercatchers’ the sounds of the night take on an active agency: ‘a plucked bass / turning things over // and over’ (23). In ‘5 Career Moves Negotiated in the Dark on a Back Step in Northern Europe’ the ‘career moves’ of the title are imaginative extrapolations of specific sounds that Caddel used as the starting points of his poems. The ‘Whack! Whack!’ of a ‘heavy slab’ provides the impetus for the poem ‘Pavier’, leading Caddel into a meditation of paths and journeys: ‘the sad / sky path we all must walk’ (9). Meanwhile, ‘Distiller’ begins:

The deep throb of a cello. Water
 becomes us all, our
 starry selves. That we could
 lose so much and still

live. 43% proof is pure
 belief, clarinets below the
 surface of our breathing – *in*,
 and *out*. (10)

Through a kind of synaesthetic furtherance, the sound of a cello conjures an image of water, which, in turn, leads to the realisation of the materiality of our bodies. The romantic notion that the carbon of our body originated in stars is undercut by Caddel’s ‘pure belief’ in 43% proof liquor; but, despite this, we have already arrived at an understanding of the human body at ecological, global and interstellar scales. The clarinets further reinforce the idea that this understanding is underpinned by the rhythm of our breathing – the constant music that forms the basis of both poetry and our existence in the world. In this sequence, the ‘meanings’ of the poems are generated by the relationships and connections between the different sounds of Caddel’s

environment. These are ‘meanings’ that, in Bunting’s terms, can be ‘felt’ rather than clearly ‘understood’.

The desire to make the reader ‘feel’ rather than ‘understand’ the meaning of his poetry led Caddel to experiment with a range of musical forms. Following Bunting’s decision to write in the forms of ‘Sonatas’ and ‘Odes,’ Caddel experimented with his own forms derived from classical music³⁴. ‘Fantasia in the English Choral Tradition’ was written to echo the sound created by cathedral choirs, while elsewhere in his *Selected Poems*, there are poems written as ‘Reels’ and ‘Movements’ as well as an invented form – the ‘Rigmarole’.

In her essay ‘Radical Landscapes: Contemporary Poetry in the Bunting Tradition’, Harriet Tarlo writes that ‘like Bunting, Caddel uses musical forms and terms to explore the changing, shape-shifting environment’ (158). Tarlo focuses primarily on Caddel’s first experiment with a long poem, ‘Fantasia in the English Choral Tradition’ (written in 1986), which Caddel described as representing a ‘dividing line’ in his poetry, an ‘opening up of the sound qualities of my language, which have preoccupied me since’ (*Quiet Music* 13). I will build on Tarlo’s work here by analysing Caddel’s later experiments with musical forms in his poetry. Specifically, I will examine how he used these forms not just to represent a ‘changing, shape-shifting environment’, but to represent such changes taking place at more-than-human scales.

The sequence ‘Ground,’ written in 1994, is structured around the form of ‘variations on a theme’. In the poem, Caddel presents various scenes, all unified by a common process or ‘Theme’. This ‘Theme’ forms the first section and recurs throughout the sequence:

Throstles feeding
on the ground

stand stiffly upright
head cocked to one side

alert for signs of prey
near the surface

running or hopping

³⁴ For more on Bunting’s use of form and music see Forde *The Poetry of Basil Bunting* 75-7.

at intervals

for a few feet

to the next listening point (*Magpie Words* 94)

This ‘Theme’ of throstles feeding, is then repeated in varying forms, using stanzas and lines of varying lengths. Meredith Quartermain has noted that, ‘the poetic method involves separating and echoing in differing rhythmic and semantic contexts the phrases given in the “Theme.” The piece is thus composed exactly as a sonata for violin would be’ (143). The ‘Theme’ of the throstles feeding is presented as a universal movement or dance – a set of actions that recur at different times, in different places, with different active agents.

In the section entitled ‘Tankers, roofs and pittance’ it is miners, rather than throstles, who are trying ‘to eke a family living from the earth’ (98). It is important to note that the birds are not presented as a metaphor for the miners; rather, the miners are another example of the ‘theme’. Throughout this sequence, humans are no more important than any of the non-human agents. In fact, the poem is not about people or birds; it is about the theme as it recurs in the world and how various organisms acquire meaning at the much larger scales of this ecological music.

In *Writing in the Dark* Caddel extends his use of musical forms by writing a series of ‘Nocturnes in Black and White’. A Nocturne is an ensemble piece of music in several movements, usually performed at different sittings throughout the course of an evening dinner party. In keeping with this tradition, Caddel’s Nocturnes are spaced throughout his collection; each poem is dedicated to a family member or friend and the series as a whole explores the themes of intimacy, attachment, distance and belonging. In the Nocturne ‘for Lucy’ Caddel imagines his daughter travelling far away ‘crossing mountains at night’, but still feels connected to her at the scale of the stars and moon – constant features of the night that they would both be able to see, despite the intervening distances (26). In the last Nocturne, for the poet Tony Baker and his wife Annabel, Caddel similarly re-imagines his friendship with them at a different scale:

Mycobiont and photobiont
stuck to these rocks for
decades. What can we do?
But love the light and

work towards it with
whatever. We are that
old though we don't
feel it. Years bond us

knowing we're here now, a
short bright space of almost
black and white.

Together. Scan it now. (40)

Here, Caddel views a decades-long friendship at an ecological scale, describing it in terms of the life-processes of lichens. Human life, like that of lichens, is figured as nothing more than a process of working towards light – a fitting description of Caddel's poetic practice, which works towards the figurative illumination of a deeper understanding of his night-time environment. However, Caddel is aware that for every moment of light and understanding, there are equal moments of darkness and uncertainty. The years of his friendship with Tony and Annabel are encapsulated in the image of 'a short bright space of almost black and white'. Seen at the more-than-human timescales that Caddel has explored throughout the collection, this is what human existence amounts to – something so fleeting it could be 'scanned' like a barcode. But, importantly, the 'scanning' of life is something that can be done 'together', making it meaningful in human terms. Throughout his 'Nocturnes in Black and White', Caddel uses the communal nature of the Nocturne to explore human relationships at more-than-human scales, while still asserting the importance of such relationships, even when imagined at these scales.

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For the other poets discussed in this thesis, the music of their poetry is heavily influenced by the rhythms of movement along, around or across border spaces. In contrast, Caddel's exploration of the border between day and night is characterised by a conspicuous *lack* of movement. For Burnside, Clark and Oswald, the conceptualisation of the self at ecological scales comes from the physical interaction of the human subject and their environment. The act of beating the bounds allows for a spatial scaling of the

subject in relation to their physical environment. In Caddel's poetry, the border between day and night can be explored without needing to move (indeed, most of the poems were written from the comfort of his own back garden). By simply sitting out, experiencing day turn to night, Caddel enacts a *temporal* beating of the bounds, which consequently allows for the scaling of the self in relation to more-than-human *timescales*.

Much of the movement that occurs in *Writing in the Dark* is distant, disembodied or imagined. We hear of Caddel's daughter on a plane journey, a sequence is devoted to '6 Vessels Encountered in the Dark in Spaces Between East and West' and another to hypothetical 'Career Moves'. Where physical movement is mentioned in the poems, it is presented as a laborious activity. In the sequence '6 Workers on the Northumbrian Coast in the Dark Between Land and Sea' Caddel describes: 'these dunes. Sand / piled and slipping silent / round my boots at / night' (24). Here, and elsewhere in the collection, human movement is hampered by the darkness. This recognition of human limitations links Caddel's explorations of borders with Thomas A. Clark's. For both poets, borders impose physical limitations on people, but it is the acknowledgement of these limitations that allows for a deeper understanding of what is beyond these borders. The difficulty of human movement seen in '6 Workers', contrasts with the unimpeded nocturnal movements of bats, insects and birds that Caddel describes in numerous other poems. Caddel's poetry suggests that we can gain a deeper understanding of our relationship to those creatures that are at home in the night, but only if we are respectful of the physical limitations that the darkness places on us, and are content to stay still, quiet and be attentive to our surroundings.

The difficulty of movement in *Writing in the Dark* could also be a reflection of Caddel's illness whilst writing these poems. This difficulty is overtly linked to considerations of death in the poem 'Breaker':

Alive or dead. This
edge we patrol nightly.
On this side our ankles
turn on stones, their music

of clack on clack is endless
as an unseen moon pulls
here, then there – a lone

redshank beats along the line

its whistle unfathomable.

This is land, we know it

and it breaks our step.

There is grey sea. (24)

This poem portrays the border between life and death as an ‘edge’ that is constantly revisited and imaginatively ‘patrolled’ in the dark. This repeated imaginative beating of the bounds is Caddel’s way of attempting to understand and map this figurative edge. The difficulty of moving through the dark and making sense of this edge is shown through his struggling movements: his ankles are turned on stones and, eventually, his step is ‘broken’, resulting in a feeling of immobility. This feeling is compounded by the ‘endless’, ‘unfathomable’ sounds of the night and the ‘pull’ of the unseen moon. Measured in terms of these planetary sounds and movements, human life seems at once fleeting and static. Here, and throughout the collection, death becomes linked to the uncertainty of darkness and the ‘endless’, ‘unfathomable’ temporal scales that Caddel seeks to represent.

As I have already shown throughout this thesis, the theme of death is associated with border spaces in both Burnside’s and Oswald’s work, and is central to their explorations of the self in more-than-human, ecological terms. But in Caddel’s final collection, this theme takes on a very personal dimension. The potential proximity of his own death imbues his poetry with a human urgency. His poetry reflects the negative uncertainties of having a terminal illness, while also exploring the creative potential of thinking about death in more-than-human, ecological terms.

In her article ‘Song in a Murderous Time’ Meredith Quartermain writes that ‘the poems in *Writing in the Dark* confront death head-on’ (146). As we have already seen, Caddel uses the poems in this collection, to explore the span of human life at ecological scales. This exploration of life and death can be traced back to an earlier poem, in which Caddel specifically explores an ecocentric perspective of leukaemia, the disease that he eventually died from. ‘Counter’, written just before he began work on *Writing in the Dark*, combines Caddel’s interests in musical arrangements and ecological forms; as he writes in his note to the poem: ‘The formal structure celebrates a number of works on the dance-language of bees, and diseases of the blood’ (*Magpie Words* 180). The poem is typical of Caddel’s longer work, eschewing obvious ‘meaning’ in favour of a musical

structure of repeated refrains and variations on a set of themes, images and phrases – a structure that attempts to reflect the continuous movement of ‘the dance-language of bees’ and ‘diseases of the blood’. The poem establishes a ‘counter’ – a continuous measure, or scale – that connects all of the movements of Caddel’s environment. He describes how all of the elements of his environment – bees, diseases, swifts, stars, leaves and people – ‘become / for a moment / together // unending’ (35). In the final section, leaves fall ‘but fall / is not // what they / do, dancing / so – it is // an active / process still / unending’ (37). The ecocentric form and movement of the poem connects everything, so that the falling leaves turn into:

poison
leaked to tissue –
or across borders – deliberate
form seeking in fleet
foot dance, a signal
towards an unknown (38)

The ‘diseases of the blood’, which one would assume to be explored in anthropocentric terms, in relation to human life, are presented as just another expression of the ‘unending’ processes at work in the poet’s environment. This view of human life is strikingly similar to Oswald’s in *Dart*: both poets present death as just another change that takes place within much bigger ecological processes. Along with ‘the dance-language of bees’, the ceaseless movement of Caddel’s own ‘diseases of the blood’ serves as a lens through which he can view his time on earth in ecocentric terms.

Peter Quartermain discusses various meanings of the poem’s title: ‘*Counter*: one who reckons; a table or board on which money is counted; contrary reckoning. It is also a term in music, and a defence or retaliation’ (jacketmagazine.com). As I have already noted, I read ‘counter’ as a kind of measure or scale; but it is also a small piece marking progress in a game, and a mechanism that marks the passage of time. The themes of time passing and marking progress are central to the poem, which Caddel wrote to mark his fiftieth birthday, just four years before he died.

In *Writing in the Dark* Caddel’s illness has grown in scale. Where the ‘diseases of the blood’ were just one undifferentiated element in the unending movement of ‘Counter’, in *Writing in the Dark*, illness and death become metonymically linked with the darkness of night, which permeates the whole collection. In ‘Little Black Book of

Dark Things' Caddel observes that 'parts of a / human body, seen // on a scan, are dark', implicitly linking this image of illness with the creative, positive connotations of darkness celebrated throughout the poem (32). Just as the 'diseases of the blood' were presented alongside the other positive, ecological processes of 'Counter', the darkness of death becomes intrinsically linked to the creative potentiality of Caddel's night time environment.

While Caddel celebrates the deeper understanding and sense of wellbeing that can be attained by coming to terms with death as a necessary part of ecocentric processes, he also uses his poems to criticise the anthropocentric discourses that cause meaningless deaths every day. During the time that he was 'writing in the dark' the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre occurred. This event caused his personal feelings about his own 'dark times' to take on a public dimension as he sought to voice his 'revulsion both from the action and the reaction, and a determination to resist the implicit political lies of both' (Flowers 38). In the sequence 'Acts of Terror' Caddel returns to the concerns of his earlier poetry and writes against prevailing political discourses – the 'fundamentals' of both the East and the West:

fundamental – my
dark faith my
own, my

doubts. Not
yours
urging death

or yours
urging still more
death (*Writing in the Dark* 37)

In place of the ill-conceived certainties of both groups of 'fundamentals', Caddel asserts his fundamental belief in his own 'dark faith' – a 'faith' that promotes doubt and uncertainty as creative, life affirming forces.

Throughout *Writing in the Dark*, uncertainty and doubt are shown to be central to any attempt to think about our time on earth in more-than-human terms. In particular,

they allow Caddel to come to terms with his own illness in a positive, creative way. In 'Shiner' he writes:

One star overhead, sound
of night frost crackling. We
follow hard with all our
lives, there's nothing more

of it than space. In this dark
enfolding, we've all just our-
selves, memories, our breathing
individual. Standing

lost so alone in this music
or walking or listening
for what light, what plain
morning we're moving towards – (49)

The pun of the title links the vast temporal and spatial scales of a star with the human fragility of a bruise. Both bruise and star serve as external signifiers of deeper processes at work beyond the surfaces of the skin and the night. When we think of our lives on these very different scales we must embrace the fact that we are connected to processes, movements and music that we will never be able to fully understand. Here, Caddel suggests that all we can do is work within the limitations of our selves, memories and breath (the source of music and poetry), and, thus, move towards a deeper understanding of our place in the world.

The collection concludes with 'Nocturnall', a fittingly unfinished poem written 'towards / an end' (54). Writing to his wife and daughter, Caddel describes himself:

regretting nothing with you
no moment
in the dark by
what light
other than
that there are not

more of them. (54)

Nearing the end of his time, Caddel did not attempt to create a single, totalising image to encapsulate his life. Instead, he chose to remember small moments ‘in the dark’, half-remembered, half-glimpsed and perhaps not fully understood, defined by ‘what light’ was available. The border between day and night serves as a time when Caddel can celebrate these small moments and explore the ways in which they may offer him a deeper understanding of his place in the world. In his final poem, in keeping with the rest of his collection, human life is celebrated as a collection of uncertainties experienced in the dark.

Conclusion

The themes of doubt and uncertainty are central to the environmental poetics of all the poets discussed in this thesis. Burnside's boundaries of the dwelling space, Clark's coastlines and mountain ranges, Oswald's river and Caddel's border between day and night, all function as sites where these poets can explore the limits of anthropocentric thought. Moving beyond these limits, into glimpses of ecocentric views of the world and more-than-human scales of being, necessitates an engagement with uncertainty – with what we do not (and, perhaps, cannot) know.

In 'The Science of Belonging' Burnside writes that the main function of poetry is to explore and celebrate the role of mystery in our lives:

while science at its best seeks to reduce our ignorance, it cannot – and should not seek to – eliminate mystery. The more we know, the more the mystery deepens. If poetry has a role in relation to science, it is to remind science of that universal truth. In this, it is also an essentially ecological discipline. (95)

To work with the unknowable 'mystery' of the world, we must engage in thinking and writing that, at times, runs contrary to received knowledge. Burnside writes that the poetry he most values 'is concerned with image and cadence and – I cannot avoid saying it – a form of magical (that is, invocative) thinking' (Brown and Paterson 24). He finds examples of this kind of 'magical thinking' in folklore, old belief systems and anti-rational philosophies. Discussing his celebration of the 'mystery of the land' in his early poetry, he writes:

A similar case can be made for folk myths and fairy tales, for the preservation of old recipes and curses, spells, songs, invocations, weather charms, cultivars, forms, sub-species. It is the case for the irrational, the case against every kind of reductionism – behaviourism, positivism, materialism. (Brown and Paterson 323)

In her introduction to her anthology of environmental poetry *The Thunder Mutters*, Oswald shows a similar desire to celebrate alternative kinds of knowledge, writing that 'the knack of enervating nature (which starts in literature and quickly spreads to everything we touch) is an obstacle to ecology which can only be countered by a kind of

porousness or sorcery that brings living things unmediated into the text' (x). 'Sorcery' is a good word to describe Oswald's invocation of the river's mutterings. Indeed, it is a useful term for thinking about the creative techniques of all of the poets discussed in this thesis. For their poetry to be successful, it demands a suspension of disbelief. If we are to learn anything from transformations, projected selves, talking rivers or the dance-language of bees, we must, to some extent, allow ourselves to believe in magic. If we give ourselves over to these creative conceits, as all of these poets ask us to do, then we may gain an insight into non-human agencies and more-than-human scales of thought.

Terms like 'sorcery' and 'magic' do, however, raise problems for critical discourse; as Timothy Clark points out:

To acknowledge the agency of nature clearly accords already with all kinds of strategies of literary representation – mythic, magical realist, animist and fantastic. The problem for future ecocriticism may not be the plurality of ways of voicing the agencies of nature that already exist in the literatures of the world. It is in developing kinds of critical articulacy able to do justice to such agency and not, for instance, reading all figurations of the non-human and so on solely as a function, a 'construct', of human cultural contexts. (*Introduction to Literature and the Environment* 162)

As I have shown throughout this thesis, Critical Realism provides a discourse with the critical articulacy to do justice to these poets' explorations of mystery, uncertainty and alternative kinds of knowledge. It provides a theoretical framework for the development of knowledge without relying on positivist 'Truth' or becoming trapped in the relativist assertion that there is no truth at all. It offers us a way of talking about the value and meaning of poetry that rejects the notion of *absolute* meaning, but still works towards a representation of *deeper* meanings of our relationship with our environment.

In her essay 'Radical Landscapes' Harriet Tarlo makes the case for Caddel to be included in a tradition of northern poets who, under the influence of Basil Bunting, combine realist poetics with a critical questioning of the extent to which the complexity of our environment can be represented in language: 'even as they refuse to deny the presence of the poet in the landscape, we find in these poetries a radical questioning of the idea that land can be translated into words, and of the idea that we can fully perceive or understand the "nature" we find around us' (151). This is indeed a 'radical' step in the development of environmental poetics; however, as we have seen throughout this

thesis, this attitude towards language is not limited to a single tradition. Caddel's Critical Realist attitude towards language is shared with poets as diverse as John Burnside, Thomas A. Clark and Alice Oswald. Any poetry that attempts to represent our relationship with our environment at more-than-human scales must utilise a poetics that is, to some extent, Critical Realist. Human language cannot function fully at a more-than-human scale, and an ecocentric perspective cannot be fully realised if we are bound to the anthropocentrism of words. Yet, we must make the assumption (verified by the reader) that poetry can communicate *something* of these connections between perspectives and scales, and that this *something* can be developed, over time, not into concrete certainty or absolute knowledge, but into a deeper understanding of our place in the world.

*

My central argument in this thesis has been that borders are used in a wide range of environmental poetry as sites where poets can explore a deeper understanding of our relationship with our environment. Such an understanding is characterised by an appreciation of the interconnection of anthropocentric and ecocentric systems of thought and being, and a concurrent understanding of the relationship between the self and its environment defined at non-human and more-than-human scales. Fundamental to acquiring this deeper understanding is the act of beating the bounds – tracing these borders and engaging with the environment physically as well as mentally. I have used this thesis to examine, firstly, how environmental poets writing out of very different traditions have approached these ideas; and, secondly, how the specific conditions and features of different borders have influenced both the form and content of the poetry that engages with them.

Due to space constraints, I have only been able to discuss one poet in relation to each of the different borders that I have chosen to examine. An extended study could compare the ways in which different poets write about similar border spaces. Thomas A. Clark's coastlines could be compared with those of Jen Hadfield and other Scottish 'Island Poets'. Similarly, Alice Oswald's river could be discussed in relation to the watery 'Betweenlands' of Philip Gross' *The Water Table*. Other contemporary poets who explore borders in their work include Kathleen Jamie, Lee Harwood, Colin Simms, Peter Riley, Kelvin Corcoran and Andy Brown. Extending this research to include

contemporary environmental poetry from outside of Britain would undoubtedly create further interesting comparisons.

Alternatively, an extended study could compare the act of beating of the bounds in poetry and the ‘New Nature Writing’ that I mentioned briefly in my introduction. I have already started to move my research in this direction in an article entitled ‘Beating the Bounds: Mapping the Borders of Self and Landscape in the Work of John Burnside and Tim Robinson’³⁵. A comparative study of poetry and non-fiction would allow for a much broader consideration of form – too broad to fit within the parameters of this thesis. In particular, it would be interesting to examine the ways in which the act of beating the bounds has been used as a creative framework in very different kinds of writing.

As I have shown throughout this thesis, the issue of scale is a fundamental concern for a wide range of contemporary environmental poetry. As we enter the era of climate change, the need to understand the connections between human and ecological scales becomes even more urgent. In this thesis I have investigated how poets from very different traditions make such connections and develop an understanding of the relationship between people and their environment at non-human and more-than-human scales. It becomes apparent, when examining the work of these poets, that a simple and effective means of beginning to engage with the complex issue of scale is the exploration of borders – the act of beating the bounds.

³⁵ *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 17. 1 (February 2013).

Lines of Flight.

In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write that ‘in a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata or territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification’ (4). This is a particularly useful idea to consider when thinking about how to conclude a creative writing thesis: how to move from the ‘segmentarity’ and ‘strata’ of critical thought, which demands closure and the formation of conclusions, to the ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘destratification’ of creative writing, which must take the ideas and themes of the thesis in new directions. How do you conclude a research project without closing off the creative potential necessary for writing poetry? Deleuze and Guattari’s answer is simple: you take a ‘line of flight’.

Deleuze and Guattari’s central concepts of ‘rhizomatic thought’ and ‘Becoming’, which they use to theorise the potential interconnection of everything from humans and animals to objects and discourses, have been seen as important ideas for environmental philosophy³⁶. Indeed, certain aspects of their writing could be seen to relate to many of the themes of this thesis. However, I believe that it would be misrepresentative to read Deleuze and Guattari’s work in terms of environmental philosophy. While certain concepts like ‘Becoming-Animal’ may seem to offer a way of theorising the interconnection of anthropocentric and ecocentric systems of thought and being, the process of ‘Becoming-Animal’ cannot be separated from that of ‘Becoming-Woman’, ‘Becoming-War’, ‘Becoming-Imperceptible’ or Becoming-Anything Else. The philosophy of *A Thousand Plateaus* resists application to any kind of system of values or meaning – anthropocentric, ecocentric or otherwise. If there is an overall concern linking the huge range of ideas explored in the book, it is the promotion of creativity and change – the ‘deterritorialization’ of ideas as soon as they form anything like a stable system³⁷. Deleuze and Guattari’s theorizing of the ‘lines of flight’ along which ideas change and develop, provides a useful model for thinking about how the themes and concerns of a critical research project can be developed into creative writing.

Since the turn of the century there has been a rise in the publication of collections of writers’ reflections on their creative practice, from anthologies like *Strong*

³⁶ See Hochmann ‘Green Cultural Studies’; and Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* 197-8.

³⁷ See especially the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* 3-28. However, this promotion of creativity can be seen throughout the book.

Words and Don't Ask Me What I Mean to the four volumes of *The Paris Review Interviews* and the *New York Times*' collections of essays *Writers on Writing*. The title of the anthology *Don't Ask Me What I Mean* playfully acknowledges the problems inherent in trying to write critically about one's own work. Instead of attempting to explain *what* a piece of writing means, the most useful self-reflexive commentaries focus on *how* the writer has explored specific themes or concerns through their creative practice and *how* they have transformed their research (of whatever kind) into creative writing. I believe that these questions of praxis may be effectively addressed by examining the 'lines of flight' the writer took when creatively developing the central themes and ideas of their project. In this final chapter, I will briefly highlight some of the lines of flight that I took when transforming my critical research into creative practice.

*

The first line of flight, fittingly, led me to focus on birds³⁸. Researching the significance of border spaces in contemporary poetry drew my attention to the association between birds and borders. Coastlines, rivers, cliffs, tree-lines, hedges and the border between day and night are all significant for birds – as nesting sites, feeding grounds and (in the case of dusk and dawn) as times for hunting. Yet, they do not present obstacles for birds in the way that they do for people. By virtue of highly specialised physical and sensory capabilities, birds are able to cross many borders that are impassable to humans; both material boundaries and, according to folklore and myth, supernatural ones.

In his introduction to *Birds Britannica*, Mark Cocker writes that birds 'move freely across boundaries between the domestic and the wild, between our sense of what is familiar and what is unknown' (x). In British folklore, bird migrations were explained in terms of magical transformations, while nocturnal birds, especially owls, were associated with death, dark magic and the spirit world. Even today:

owls' strange calls still define the limits of our sunlit domain. They remind us that we share this land, even our gardens and outbuildings, with creatures that are completely other than ourselves. In turn, these beautiful if elusive

³⁸ I am taking some liberties with the meaning of 'lines of flight' here. In French, Deleuze and Guattari use the term *fuite*, which, as Brian Massumi points out in his notes on the translation, covers the act of 'fleeing or eluding' as well as 'flowing, leaking and disappearing into the distance' but 'has no relation to flying' (xvii). I do, however, feel that such word-play is in keeping with the spirit of *A Thousand Plateaus*.

companions reassure us that there is still mystery in our everyday lives. (Cocker and Mabey 284-5)

This sense of mystery and otherness that birds elicit goes some way towards explaining what Cocker calls the ‘indefinable feelings of fellowship’ that people in Britain have for birds (ix). This fellowship stems from material connections, such as the fact that the presence of ‘birds of open country’ like rooks, lapwings and skylarks, is ‘directly attributable’ to our agricultural practices; but it is also a reflection of the figurative importance of birds, which ‘are frequently invoked to convey some of our most cherished ideas about beauty, freedom and even life itself’ (ix). In our culture, birds link human concepts, such as ‘beauty’ and ‘freedom’, with the way that we dwell in our environment at ecological scales. As symbols, they cross the border between anthropocentric and ecocentric systems of meaning.

The view of birds as keepers of more-than-human knowledge is not limited to British culture. In an essay on poetry and ecology, the Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst discusses the importance of diving birds in First Nations mythology:

The Haida poet Skaay refers to human beings as *xhaaydla xitiit ghidaay*: “plain, ordinary surface birds.” Creatures with more power – killer whales, loons, grebes, sea lions, seals – know how to dive. They pierce the surface, the *xhaaydla* it is called in Haida. If we go with them – if, that is, we are *invited* to go with them – we enter the world of the myths. We come back speaking poetry. (*The Tree of Meaning* 42)

For the Haida, humans are a relatively unimportant, physically and spiritually limited sub-species of bird. You don’t even have to believe in myths or folklore to come round to this particular perspective. A diving bird moving from air to water enacts a physical transformation that is totally beyond our capabilities. This is not to mention the almost incomprehensible abilities of other birds: the sound imaging techniques of owls, the vocal range of starlings and the intuitive navigation techniques of storm petrels. Recognising my status as a ‘plain, ordinary surface bird’ was central to my attempts to think, and write, about non-human and more-than-human ways of being in the world.

However, the major obstacle to this line of flight was the sheer number of bird poems already written in the English language. Indeed, as Tim Dee writes in his foreword to *The Poetry of Birds*, ‘it would be a challenge to find a poet who *hasn’t*

written one' (xxi). An even greater challenge is to write a bird poem that says something new.

*

Taking a line of flight from Alice Oswald's invocation of an ecocentric voice in *Dart*, I approached the subject of birds through the perspectives of non-human, more-than-human figures. Returning to folklore and myth, I created voices for, and imagined the perspectives of, pagan gods, scarecrows, ageless Augurs and, of course, the birds themselves. I have already discussed the uses of anthropomorphism in my chapter on Oswald, but it is worth noting here that, in *Birdscapes*, Jeremy Mynott discusses this practice in relation to writing about birds: 'The fact is, we don't know what it is like to be a bird, and so we can't know what it is like to produce a full and authentic description of one. We can only use our terms, not theirs. [...] This is the problem for which anthropomorphism is both the symptom and the remedy' (291).

In order to practice 'strong' rather than 'weak' anthropomorphism³⁹, I have tried to remain faithful to the ecological and biological details of the birds that I am giving voice to. In the sequences 'Nightbird Riddles', 'The Estuary' and 'The River' I explored the interconnection of birds and their specific habitats through the evocation (and invocation) of the birds' voices. Experimenting with the rhythms, forms and contents of the birds' speeches became a way of reflecting and exploring their habits and evolutionary quirks. Similarly, while folklore and mythology may, at first glance, seem to distance us from the reality of birds, I tried to draw on specific elements of folklore and myth that highlight particular details of the birds' behaviour. The linguistic association between peregrines and 'peregrini' (early Christian pilgrims) lent itself to a view of the falcon's migration as a kind of pilgrimage. Similarly, the links between storm petrels and St Peter provided a vivid image to highlight the birds' habit of 'walking on water'. When I read that Zeus may have originally been worshipped as a cuckoo deity, I saw that the story of Zeus deposing the titans was an apt metaphor for the way that the Mediterranean cuckoo infiltrates the nests of much larger birds.

This information isn't necessary for reading the poems, but I wanted to mention these examples here to highlight the Critical Realist approach that I have taken to my anthropomorphic representations of birds. By drawing on myths, legends and folktales

³⁹ For a discussion of these terms, see Timothy Clark *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* 192-201.

that are clearly not real, and by writing in voices that I had no direct knowledge of, I hoped to draw attention to interesting observations and important realities about how birds exist at more-than-human scales. Most importantly, I wanted to be playful with my subject matter and use this playfulness to destabilise the anthropocentric scales at which we normally view our environment and the other organisms in it.

This sense of playfulness and instability found its way into a series of poems written in the voice of a scarecrow. Reading various folklores from different cultures, I discovered that scarecrows recur as magical figures or guides who have absolute knowledge of the world, gained simply by virtue of the fact that they stand around outside all day. Writing from the perspective of a scarecrow seemed a natural way to inhabit an ecological voice. He suited my needs well, right down to his physiognomy, his rag-tag construction, which could suggest the themes of interconnectedness and unstable, temporary identities. As a figure who returns year after year wearing dead people's clothes, the scarecrow could present a strange and unsettling perspective on both human and bird life seen at non-human, ecological scales. Importantly, though, I wanted to play with the concept of 'absolute' knowledge, by presenting the Scarecrow as a figure whose views are just as flawed as his human counterparts, but who (like many humans) pompously believes his pronouncements to be impeachable. Throughout my collection I wanted to use the Scarecrow's voice to explore the inherent irony of trying to write from a more-than-human perspective – a perspective that can be suggested through creative thought and poetic language, but which constantly highlights the limitations of such language and thought.

When I was taught critical thinking at school, I was told that 'building straw men' was the sign of a bad argument. A 'straw man' is a fabrication of a view-point or position, which is then engaged with in place of the actual argument or issue at hand. To engage with an issue critically, one must always attempt to fully understand and faithfully represent the subject positions of those involved in the argument. Building straw men makes for bad critical thinking, but it provides an interesting and useful creative technique for environmental poetry.

The problem with ecological issues is that their size and complexity resist the usual techniques of critical thinking. As Timothy Morton memorably puts it, in the face of large scale issues such as climate change, we can't simply carry on with this endless game of 'anything you can do, I can do *meta*'⁴⁰. It's not enough to continue in our

⁴⁰ From his exchange with Richard Kerridge following the video paper 'The Age of Hyperobjects: Hegel, Ecology, Aesthetics' at the Emergent Environments Conference, London 2011.

attempts to step outside and redefine our subject positions, because ultimately we are all stuck within much bigger ecological processes that we will never be able to delimit or even fully understand. We can't think our way out of our situation, but by acknowledging the limits of our understanding we might be able to creatively act our way through it. The use of humour to satirise and destabilise limited, anthropocentric discourses was central to my invocation of more-than-human perspectives, in particular the recurring figures of the scarecrow and the Augur.

*

The theme of augury, or divination using birds, is closely linked to the idea of crossing borders. In the time of the Roman Republic, auspices were taken before crossing the 'sacred boundary' of the city, or engaging in war to extend Rome's borders. For numerous cultures throughout history, bird divination served (and, indeed, still serves) as a means of crossing the border between the present and the future, life and the afterlife⁴¹. In the introduction to *Divination and Oracles*, Michael Loewe and Carmen Blacker write that divinatory practices 'are likely to flourish in proportion to men's recognition of their own weakness and consequent need for help in solving problems beyond the scope of human competence' (2). Considering the 'derangement of scales' that Timothy Clark identifies in most discourses relating to climate change, our current situation may be the perfect time for a resurgence of augural practices.

It seems significant that on an archipelago like the British Isles, migratory bird numbers provide some of the first indicators of changing weather patterns. Birds provide a window into the workings of the world at more-than-human scales; without them we would lose an important means of understanding our place in the world. Ted Hughes reflects on this idea in 'Swifts': 'They've made it again, / Which means the globe's still working' (*Collected Poems* 315). But what if the birds' migration patterns start to change, as they are now?⁴² Discussing the links between bird migrations and climate change, Richard Mabey asks: 'Will the geese no longer need to travel south? Or the swallows ever leave? How will we cope if not just the climate, but the ancient cultural icons through which we've made sense of the seasons are also transformed?' (*Brush With Nature* 50). The theme of uncertainty was central to my thesis and I wanted

⁴¹ For more information see Beard and North, eds *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World*; and Michael Loewe and Carmen Blacker, eds. *Divination and Oracles*.

⁴² At the time of writing, BBC News was reporting declining swift numbers due to the effects of the wet early summer. See 'Wet Weather Sparks Concern for Swifts'.

to further explore this theme in my poetry. How would divination work if climate change alters its frames of reference? Where does it leave us when even an Augur and his gods don't know what's going to happen next?

Prophets and seers are usually presented as romantic figures, and the ability to commune with nature is often reserved for the most altruistic individuals; but the historical reality of augury was very different. Prophets throughout the classical world were widely viewed as swindlers, liars and hypocritical politicians of the highest order. The Athenian playwright Aristophanes gives a highly satirical and irreverent portrayal of the vices of oracle interpreters in his play *The Birds*. Roman augurs frequently held office as magistrates and consuls – positions of political power that meant they had a vested interest in arriving at the 'correct' interpretation of auspices⁴³. This cynical side of divination seems especially pertinent for our times. There's nothing romantic about climate change; it is a symptom of political and material realities – stupidity and units of waste. Our only solutions to the problem are figured in terms of investment, cost-effectiveness and 'carbon credits'. So why would an Augur offer his services, or his 'lessons', for free?

If prophecy is discussed in relation to climate change it is usually through apocalyptic rhetoric or meaningless phrases like 'the end of the world'. Thinking about the future in more-than-human terms necessitates a realisation that climate change will not lead to the end of the world, just the end of us, and the relatively small sections of the biosphere that are meaningful to us. This species and habitat loss still equates to unthinkable devastation, but life will continue to exist beyond the event – the world will go on without us. Geologically, we have now officially entered the 'anthropocene', an era characterised by the layer of radiation and non-degradable waste left on the earth's surface. To see into the future, we need only look at the 'disposable' plastics surrounding us, which will form our geological record, and wonder at this bizarre 'derangement of scales'.

⁴³ See Blacker and Loewe, eds *Divination and Oracles* 87-114.

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LESSONS IN AUGURY

PhD Poetry Collection

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*Will the geese no longer need to travel south? Or the swallows ever leave?
How will we cope if not just the climate, but the ancient cultural icons through
which we've made sense of the seasons are also transformed?*

– Richard Mabey. *A Brush With Nature*.

News

A dark street: a sudden wind
lifts the pages of an old newspaper
into loose ampersands.

A man stands in a doorway, in the band
of still-warm air above the step,
watching the drift of pages
against an ink-stained sky.

He sees something in the movement,
something like a story

that a half-forgotten grandfather
used to tell, of drifts
of seabirds blown inland by a storm:
how he stood by the back door
as the air above the garden filled,
for a moment, with bodies and wing tips.

The next day the fields were carpeted
with birds, until in one breath
they lifted skywards
like rain returning to the clouds.

CERTAINTIES

*You ask... 'Why does an augur think it a favourable omen
when a raven flies to the right, or a crow to the left?' ...
You have a perfect right to ask, but that is not the point at issue now.
The question is: does it happen, or does it not?*

– Cicero, *On Divination* I.39.

Your Guide the Scarecrow

In various folklores Scarecrows appear as guides who have absolute knowledge of the world, gained by virtue of the fact that they spend all their time standing around outside.

What do I know about anything?

I've never been beyond these hills,
but I know that spring rains gather over the sea
when the farmer saws up wood for my bones.

I know that when he gathers my stuffing of last year's straw,
the swallows remember their nests
and leave behind the desert sun.

As I'm carried past the houses on the road to the fields,
I know who will die this winter
and provide my clothes for the coming year.

And I know that I make crows disappear.

One by one

with each blow

as I'm hammered into the ground.

I suppose I must be the first cause, the immovable mover.

If I didn't laugh, the wind wouldn't rattle
through the hedges. If I never had an unsettling thought
there would be no summer storms.

If my arms weren't outstretched for months on end,
the crops would never grow.

Only when I'm gone can winter arrive
and the sky become dark with crows.

The Weather-Making Kings

Beneath the dishes on the cliffs, they are mapping a future world.

Tide systems and cloud formations bloom
across the screens.

In one corner, a pot plant blooms
beneath the glow of an ultraviolet lamp.
They have been here for years, in these airless rooms,
measuring, blinking, watching changes unfold like ferns.

Their own lives passed in a breath.
They do not think of them.
They have seen stone turn to liquid,
liquid to stone,
mountains burst in the ground like seeds
and valleys open, close,
to a deeper, tectonic breathing.

Their maps breathe and grow. Screens flicker
like sunlight through leaves.
The pot plant dies. Someone replaces it.
The room shakes then stills,
the floor splits and ice knocks into their shoulders.
They stumble on the broken edges of continents,
their footsteps disappearing behind them.

They have seen what is to come.
There is nothing to do
but watch, blink, measure

and yet, some nights they go out to the cliffs
to draw lots beneath the pale moons of the dishes.
One steps forward
– you can see him through the wire –
wearing rags? No, feathers...

and as he jumps from the cliffs, graceful and silent,
you can hear their prayer:
that before he hits the surf, he will rise as a bird
and bring a change in the weather.

Ordinary Surface Birds

'We are plain, ordinary surface birds'

– *Skaay.*

Out to sea, the gannets fall like heavy, slanting rain;
disappearing like water into water.

I wait for them to rise again

like bubbles

hanging on the surface, pausing
as they readjust to the bulk and noise of air.

I try to guess how long they were under
and what they saw, crossing from weightlessness
into weightlessness,

what visions they returned with
in the oily sheen of their feathers.
But here, on the cliffs, the rain begins to fall

like gannets,

like guillemots

and terns.

And all I can see, beyond the whitening cliffs
are the hard flashes of beaks and wing-tips
breaking through the clouds.

Murmurations

A noise like the sea
above a silent sea;
the movement when two currents collide.

The creaking of buildings,
or the steel of a pier on a winter's afternoon
tightening in its skin.

The shuffling of bodies at the end of a pier;
the shuffling in a theatre
once the lights have dimmed.

A curtain pulled across the sun. A rumour
spreading like a flood.
A shadow darkening the blood.

A louder rush. A gasp
from somewhere outside the lungs.
The feeling of your heartbeat

in a storm of heartbeats.
Your body flickering, drawn
into the gap between wing and wing.

A kind of immersion. Roomfuls of water
pressing into your ears.
Voices heard through water,

or an echo of voices, strange and clear
as, one by one, the crowd resurfaces
suddenly alone in the empty air.

The First Lesson: Introductions

Call me Attus Navius. Call me St. Francis of the Birds. Call me Calchas, Tiresias, Laocoon, St. Milburga or Cuthbert of Lindisfarne.

They say I was raised in an eyrie, that I have feathers under my coat. But they soon stop laughing when I see a falcon stoop and send the whole country to war.

Do you see that kestrel, like a marionette under the clouds? I can show you how to pull the right strings. Give me a pair of hungry rooks and I'll set brother against brother. Father against son. A well trained dove has won me the trust of bank managers and kings; and brought me countless visits from their daughters and wives. When I send my pigeons out at night, they return heavy with people's gratitude (in blank envelopes please, in unmarked bills).

Call me Black Elk, Ten Bears, Don Juan Matus. Call me Mopsus, Lizard's Son, Skaay.

I've outlived every one of them and I'm better than them all combined. I can slip outside time like a pocket-watch in a forgotten magpie's nest, like water beading on a cormorant's back.

I've seen other worlds appear in the curve of an iridescent feather. I've watched other pasts, other futures unfold like an albatross' wings. For the right price I can give you vision sharp as a talon. I can teach you how to unwind fate, like wringing a chicken's neck.

Some Useful Proverbs

The early bird gets the worm,
which makes it the easiest to catch.

Birds of a feather are worth two in the bush,
if counted before they are hatched.

The albatross sees the farthest
who loves to hear himself sing.

The hen flies not far
if she soars with her own wings.

No matter how high the falcon glides
you can still expect a fall.

A buzzard flaying a rabbit on a rock
is not an excuse for war.

A spoken word is not a sparrow,
but it might be good for the gander.

The talkative bird finds itself in a cage
when the quiet ones flock together.

Had the pheasant not screamed in the hedgerow
and the chicken not cried at the cock,

there'd be eggs in the roost at sunrise
and no one would have been shot.

If a crow mimics a cormorant
you should start dredging the lake.

If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck and looks like a duck
it may already be too late.

And there'll be chickens being counted
in cages without number

and a single swallow over darkening trees
trying to make a summer.

Diary of the End of the World

The voice on the radio says it will happen soon. I'm sure it's right. Last winter the pine trees withered in the sun. Last summer all the seedlings in my garden were scorched by ice. Or was it the other way round? I've checked on TV and in the newspapers, but no one has any clear answers. Only the voice on the radio knows exactly what's going on.

The voice on the radio says there are only a few weeks to go. I've made a list of people to write to, books to return to the library, things that need using up in the cupboards. For dinner tonight I'll have lasagne sheets, tinned peas and Triple Sec. I don't have any savings left – not since the last time – but I've found a book of coupons that are still in date. Do I need cereal? Razor blades? I suppose I might as well try a new kind of detergent.

The voice on the radio says it'll be any day now. I've cleared out my bookcases, my wardrobe and drawers. I could have a huge bonfire in the garden! But I've never felt safe around flames and I wouldn't want to cause a scene. I spent the afternoon carefully sorting my belongings into the relevant recycling bins. I've kept a few essentials – cereal, razor blades, the radio by my bed.

The voice on the radio said it would happen tonight, so I decided to treat myself and stay in bed all day. When I woke it was dark, only the light from the radio greening the edges of the room. The voice seemed quieter, fading to a crackle, then a low hum. Then silence. Or almost silence. I'm sure I can still hear breathing. I'll wait for the voice to come back. The voice always comes back. It always knows what to do next.

Nostradamus

Nothing beats it – the rush, the sudden clarity.

Like pulling a tooth that's been aching for weeks.

He writes the date and event on another old betting slip,
cradling it to his chest like a long-lost heirloom.

Derangements of Scale

'Environmental slogans follow horrifying predictions of climate chaos with injunctions, no less solemn, not to leave electrical appliances on standby or overfill the kettle. Such language enacts a bizarre derangement of scales, collapsing the trivial and the catastrophic into each other'

– Timothy Clark

I boil the kettle and the crow is back at the window.

This has happened before.

Maybe it has always happened. I used to know
a thing about birds – something about feeding habits,
something about patterns of flight – but from here
this crow looks the size of a tower block. He walks
the length of the horizon, staring at himself in the glass.

I boil the kettle and a tower block falls.

It's okay, I knew that this would happen. There were signs
in the newspapers and pasted to lamp-posts.

But I didn't know that the sky would fill with dust;
that the roof-tops, the window, the crow
would all turn white with dust.

I do not know why the crow is collecting TV aerials,
coat hangers, lengths of wire.

I boil the kettle – the TV and the radio lose themselves in a storm.

There is no news, but if I listen at the wall
I can hear talk of the weather – that it will get much hotter,
that it will get much colder. I still have power,
but across the street, lights disappear,
as if the crow were stretching his wings.

At night, the kettle switches on. I wake
to the sound of flood waters, of foundations murmuring.

I turn over.

At least I don't need to worry about the kettle any more.

Through the wall, in the kitchen and in kitchens across the city

the water pools in rows of untouched cups
and crows rise like heavy clouds of steam
lugging themselves towards the open windows.

The Keeper of the Sands

At dawn, unseen, he walks out
across the vast moon-surface of the bay
to find the safe paths, to gauge
how far the sand stretches today
before it turns restless –
all depth and movement and weight.

A bad way to go – sucked under
by the distant pull of a flat grey sea.

He's seen horses dragged under,
carts loaded with cockles and shrimp,

and once he fell waist deep into the grip of it
– no birds, no wind, just the sand and its silences –

waited hours for enough firmness to return
to lever himself free.

Like breaking open a dead man's fist
finger by finger.

Even now, walking out, he feels it –
the tug, the final heavy slump of himself gone under.
Eyes heaped with sand, mouth brimful with sand.
The endless wash of sand and water.
The restlessness. The endless turning.

He puts down one foot and then the other.
This far out, there are no hard edges,
nothing fixed,
just his last pegged-out paths
where things hold for a time,
just the places where his footprints appear

or disappear
as he makes and unmakes the borders
of his world of shifting sand and water.

Lesson XIII: Making Claims

Any claim needs strong foundations. First you'll need to prepare the ground.

Start at the edges. That's important. Cliffs, rivers... You'll know them when you get your feet wet. Or fall and break a leg. They're muddy, lonely places. If you see anyone else, you haven't gone far enough.

Now follow the coastline, the lines of hedges, ditches, old cart-ruts through fields. Follow the sucking ground around marshes, follow the line of reeds. Turn when the hills turn, double back where a sand-bar disappears into the sea. Mark your route carefully. Bring the necessary documents, sharpened stakes and a spool of barbed wire.

The edges are important. Anything could happen there. They are muddy, lonely and full of uncertainty. Who's to say what you did and didn't see? That flickering just beyond the tree-line could be a crow dragging a purse of coins towards you. That flock of knot glinting over the water are telling you something in Morse code.

And if there are witnesses? Did I mention that these are muddy places? That the sands shift every day? That the rocks could crumble away at any moment? Anyone could lose their footing. No one would hear a thing.

What was I saying? Proof. Not worth the effort. If one of us starts taking photographs, making recordings, filling out forms, we'll all have to do it. We don't need to prove anything. The fields are empty to the horizon. I once saw a cockerel with two heads – one for each claimant in a very costly legal suit. Prove that I didn't!

Black Swans

'Black Swan' (meteorological term): a freak weather event, less rare than previously thought.

At first, no one believed it – a hiss
of rain that grew into pounding flight.
Roads and fields swept away by wings. Power lines
dragged down by thrashing wings.

More story than bulk and heft, we half-forgot it
(but still shuddered at thrown shadows, rugs being beaten for dust).
We moved on. We rebuilt the roads.

And no one noticed the feathers in the cooling tarmac,
the creak of wings like the echo of trees

until swans filled the sky, beaching their dark hulls
over fields, smothering new shoots in snow,
smothering roofs
snapping water pipes and bridges like limbs.

Now droughts and wild-fires spread in wingspans,
hurricanes lumber towards water,

and deep in the sea an oil pipe bursts.
We do not mistake the dark shape billowing,
hauling itself through currents, shedding feathers
but still gaining mass, growing
by Richters, by seismic shifts.

Countless Feathers: A Fable

In the mountains of the East there was a city over which no birds flew. Day and night, the people set their nets on the walls. Any bird that strayed too close was caught, had its pinions plucked and was left to roam the city's maze of roof-tops until they died. The city was a teeming mass of birds – dark clumps of rooks blocking the gutters, sparrows and starlings heaped like leaves. Falcons were mobbed by crows, crows were mobbed by gulls.

Each day the droppings were collected and taken out to the fields. Each day, new feathers were collected and taken to the palace. The palace was a maze of doors and corridors. At its heart, a throne room so wide that one side couldn't be seen from the other. A room so tall that its ceiling would have been lost, if it had not been stuffed to the rafters with feathers.

Feathers everywhere. The musty reek of feathers. Their dry rasp. The blue sheen of magpie feathers, the darker wave of swallow's tails. Feathers crammed in mounds.

In the middle of the room, sat the Emperor, cloaked in troubles. He remembered the stories his father told him: how the city's strength was bound up with its birds and its feathers. While there were birds inside its walls, it could not fall. But there were plots against him. Whispers. He called his trusted Augur to his side and asked how he could be certain that his city was safe.

The Augur told him what needed to be done: the feathers must be counted. It must be proven with numbers that the city could not fall.

The Emperor called his courtiers and set them to work. The throne room echoed with quiet counting. But one by one they lost their places. Feathers slipped between their fingers. One by one they were carried from the throne room with feathers flickering in front of their eyes.

The Emperor called his mathematicians, his statisticians, his physicists. They set up tables in the centre of the room, composed formulas, calculated areas and the angles of

curves. They had only just started on tessellation when they were carried from the throne room, clutching crumpled paper with endless drawings of feathers.

The Emperor called his subjects to the throne room – soldiers and farmers, shopkeepers and beggars. Ladders were brought in. Scaffolding was raised.

Beyond the palace the city was empty. Shops were boarded up. Crops went to seed. Only the walls were still manned. Each day the nets were raised and another bag of feathers was delivered to the Emperor. Bags piled in the corridors. Bags spilled out into the streets. No one knows when the first shot was fired, or how the fire started. The people of the city gathered outside the palace, raising torches and handfuls of feathers.

All except the Augur, who left through a side gate to collect his fee from the neighbouring Princes, a line of flightless birds following him over the mountains.

The Scarecrow on Science

On String Theory

I can feel them ploughing the next field
through the grain of my spine.

I can taste trails of musk in the back of my throat,
feel the prickle of animal tracks, and hear the thrum
of engines tunnelling through threads of birdsong.

Everything is made of threads.

I am the loose cotton of an old shirt and hat,
a face of crooked stitches sewn in sack cloth.

Look inside – I have nerves of twine,
I am built from double-helices of straw.

I am knotted into the ground, into its mesh
of worm-holes and ants' nests.

I am tied to the wind that fleshes
me out, that catches my loose threads
and unravels me over the fields.

On Genetics

I thought the barley had been acting strangely –
it's completely lost its sense of humour.
Not that its jokes were ever any good,
but now it just stands bolt upright all day
and gets really paranoid about personal hygiene.

You really shouldn't mess around with other people's stuff.
They say that DNA is like a library.
How would you like it if I broke into your house at night
and moved your books around,
or swapped them all for washing-machine instruction manuals?

Maybe at first you wouldn't notice the difference,
but your friends would soon stop speaking to you.

On Taxonomy

I don't understand your system at all.

The closest thing to a badger

is its stinking den and, materially speaking,
a fox is whatever it's just eaten from the bins.

That kestrel is the dark, hanging thought
of a field mouse;

that field mouse
is one of the kestrel's scurrying, darting dreams.

Those cows dream in acres of grass
and bales of silage;

rabbits are only rabbits
because of their tangled neurons of soil,

just as I wouldn't be myself
without this glorious absence of crows.

On Psychology

The whole concept makes me sick.
I'm perfectly comfortable with my origins,
but I'm not about to start seeing father-figures
in every bale of straw.
Am I meant to feel some kind of filial bond
with a mattress or a thatched roof?
Perhaps I should start sending Christmas cards
to the oaf who outgrew this coat.
And would you suggest that I thank the broom
or the long-dead tree
for all the support that they've given me
over the years?

Progress Reports.

Since arriving at the Community the Shaman has fully embraced the joys of quantitative research. In the morning, the curtains are opened at six and he sits at his window, watching the sun move from frame to frame, watching the clouds, watching a branch sway in and out of sight. He measures all of the movements carefully, tabulates the results and draws-up graphs with exquisite best-fit lines.

*

Since arriving at the Community the Shaman has taken an interest in geology. He keeps a pebble on his window ledge. He talks to it, taps it carefully with his stick. He says that it moves in the night. Each day he measures its progress along the window ledge against notches on his stick. When he gave the pebble a name we were forced to confiscate it.

*

Pets are not allowed at the Community, but the Shaman is encouraged with his ornithology. He mixes his own seed and the orderlies scatter it on the lawns. A tape recorder allows the Shaman to listen to the birds later, from the comfort of his bed. This limits the threat of 'regressive experience'.

*

Since the arrival of numerous stray cats these activities have been suspended and the Shaman has started a course in Quantum Physics. He generally keeps to himself, but we continue to find shoe-boxes in his wardrobe, taped shut, with dead cats inside. This seems to mark the limits of our progress.

MYTHS

But human beings fall easily into despair, and from the very beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value.

– Karen Armstrong. *A Short History of Myth.*

the Gap in the Fence, the Pot-hole in the Tow Path,
Lord of Locks and Sluices, Jetties and Weirs,
Sandbanks, Estuaries and Shingle

listens to the clamour around the islands of his thoughts.
There was a time, wasn't there,
when peacock feathers had eyes, when peacocks buckled as he passed?
There is a message, he can feel it
like the taste of chimney-smoke in the failing light.

Lesson XVII: Defining Terms

Truth is a slippery term. Try to avoid it. Like the cliff ledges where fulmars rise suddenly to shoulder height, squinting at you and smiling their moon-faced smiles. Hang around staring for too long and they'll spit in your face.

Certainty: No better. How can anything be certain when no one knows where storm petrels go for most of the year? Release one anywhere in the world and it will fly straight back to where you snatched it. That's certainty! I've probed deep inside skulls – snow geese, falcons – searching for the iron filings, the hidden compasses. But there are just cavities and channels in the bone.

That's the future – all edges, precipices and sheer drops into nothing. Or is it edgeless, like a marsh? Centreless, like the echo of a bittern hunched and booming in the reeds? You could walk in circles for days, for years, and never find the nest. You could lose yourself. You could hide a body. You could find the nest easily but what I'm trying to tell you is: what you're searching for is always on the other side of the drainage ditch. That is the only certainty.

No. Too vague. The future is like a feather. You can watch it fall or use it to line your quilt.

There used to be good months for feathers and eggs. Then I found a swallow's nest in November. The eggs cold in the damp moss and lichen. These are the seasons now: weaving back into each other like twigs or clumping together like mud under the eaves. I don't remember when I stopped going outside.

Nature: that used to mean something didn't it? That was where we saw things. Where we heard things.

Signs. Yes, I remember. If someone wanted to pass a law, I'd find them a ribbon of geese in the right quarter of sky. If a government needed a shake up, I'd find a crow that could croak the right names. But now I just sit in my chair, scanning the blank square of the skylight. Waiting for something. For what?

Birds. Must we always talk of birds? What are birds anyway? Little parcels of the future. I unravel them and sell the contents. And yet, the sky has never seemed so empty. Difficult to predict. Birdless as a blank sheet of paper. But no matter. We always know what the Gods have in mind.

The Gods. Now we come to it. The Gods are, and always have been, the highest bidders.

Calchas at Aulis

It wasn't meant to happen this way. The bay was so still
voices carried miles over the water.

No wind tonight.

No wind for days.

We had followed the Old King this far, we still bowed low
when he walked on deck, stooping under the weight of his armour.
But the generals were growing tired of bad food and stale wine,
of the heat and reek of the boats. Most of the men
had already gambled away their helmets and bright spears.
At night, as the Old King slept, we sent messengers to Troy
threatening sanctions, offering trade deals. An agreement
would soon be reached.

By day, the Old King raged, demanded action. The sea
was taunted as a nerve. So I looked to the skies
and told him that the God of the Wind would accept
nothing less than a king's daughter,
knowing he wouldn't go that far.

But perhaps I missed something –
a cry beyond the music and laughter, or a cormorant dipping silently
into the wine-dark sea –

because the wine ceased to flow
and, as our eyes cleared, we saw the Old King washing his hands,
heard something slip heavily overboard.
Our armour grew lighter, the King hefted a spear from hand to hand
and voices carried across the water

like a gathering storm.

Feeding the Sacred Chickens: A Fable

The diplomats gathered round the sacred chickens and asked about the health of the King. The chickens formed a line and walked in ever decreasing circles to where the feed was piled. After they had eaten, they dispersed, leaving a light corona of feathers. A breeze crept between the pillars of the temple, picking up the feathers one by one. The Augur told the diplomats what needed to be done.

The diplomats gathered round the sacred chickens and asked about the prospect of war. As soon as they were set loose in the pen, the chickens fell upon each other, pecking and scratching. The flagstones darkened under a mist of blood. Then they scattered, jumped the fence and rushed towards the grain store. When the sacred chickens had been caught and returned to their cages, the Augur told the diplomats what needed to be done.

Older, quieter and fewer in number, the diplomats gathered round the sacred chickens and asked about the wealth of the state. The chickens grouped together in a corner of the pen and started to lay. Their soft crooning carried through the temple. When there was silence again the chickens stood, but there were no eggs. They moved towards the feed. The Augur was about to speak, but the diplomats told him it was okay, they got that one.

One by one, in the dark of a sleepless night, the diplomats visited the sacred chickens and asked questions that the Augur could not hear. The chickens sat and stared their empty-eyed stares. Their quiet clucking gathered among the pillars of the temple like the ticking of a hidden clock. One by one the diplomats came and went. The Augur carried on mixing the feed.

Lesson XXIX: Difficult Customers

Everyone likes to think that their fate will be determined by an eagle with a snake in its talons emerging from a blood red sun. Try to temper their expectations. Their future is probably already taking shape, like the crooked mess of a jackdaw's nest in a chimney. Stick by stick. Hour by hour. Like the thump of sparrows flying into closed windows, day after day.

Everyone likes to think that they'd notice it: the briefest of shadows passing over the sun, the flutter of blood suddenly still in the hedges, a single wing-beat – nothing more than a breath – cutting back against the wind. But they just button up their coats or fumble through their pockets, as if searching for their keys. Or find themselves, on starless nights, walking barefoot through fields of corn-stubble, waiting for dark feathers to fall from the sky.

Everyone thinks they can handle the truth; but it can be too much even for us. I knew a great seer who predicted how long he had left. When the day came and nothing happened, he laughed himself to death. I once had a client who couldn't take any more and put a gun to his head. I'd only got as far as explaining the gulls on the fence posts – he never even saw the pheasant on his roof, the line of geese walking in through his half-open door.

I'd like to think you'd be sensitive to the situation. If you foresee happiness and riches, it's best to be sure – book them in for regular readings, arrange a monthly payment plan. But if it all looks bad then tell them straight. Just ask for your fee in advance.

Metamorphoses

Legal Advice for Prometheus

You may rest assured, our organisation remains firmly convinced of your innocence. The very notion that someone of your background could be involved in the trade or distribution of illegal substances is absurd. You were clearly the victim of a local gang or cartel. Can you tell me; at any point during your journey did you leave your luggage unattended?

Last month we sent a delegation to the international court. However, contact was lost following a series of unexpected storms. We have heard that ocean liners were flung into mountains, that planes were plucked from the sky and impaled on the limbs of a giant oak. We have suspended all travel until further notice.

*

As you may be aware, your case has come to the attention of pressure groups concerned with the decriminalization of the substances involved. We understand that a series of candle-lit vigils, barbeques and smoking parties have been organised to raise awareness of your plight. While we cannot openly condone such behaviour, we feel that the media attention cannot harm your case.

Last week we launched an online petition that attracted several thousand signatures. However, our internet connection went down following a series of unexpected storms. We have heard that power cables were uprooted, phone lines shredded by clouds of ice and stones, satellites dropped from the sky. We have suspended all communication until further notice.

*

Our case rests on the discriminatory use of stop and search powers and the shady nature of your incarceration. The use of vultures for 'interrogation purposes' almost certainly contravenes international law. I regret that we cannot do anything to alleviate your

immediate situation, but I understand that you are receiving daily medical treatment and that your cell has a view.

Last night our group met to draft your case. However, the meeting was interrupted by a storm. First the windows burst inwards under a weight of hail, then the roof was levered off and, one by one, the committee were dragged away by the screaming wind. I curled up in a maelstrom of glass and paper until the next morning. I have suspended the organisation until further notice.

PR for Actaeon

While it's always nice to be viewed as some sort of a symbol, my client objects to being torn apart in print several times each year. We all appreciate the current vogue for these public displays of dismemberment (we are just animals after all); but look in your hearts and ask yourselves how much it must hurt.

The transformation itself is bad enough – skeletal restructuring, skin grafts, organ compression. Hooves! Then along come the hunting-horns and the dogs. My client would like to know why it always has to be dogs.

It is nothing less than gratuitous to constantly resurrect this case. Sure, there was a pretty girl involved and a little nudity goes a long way in poetry; but the reaction was disproportionate to say the least.

If this public hounding is going to continue, my client would like to request a change of scenery. Nothing fancy, perhaps a nice venison park on the borders. All that my client asks for is a quiet life; then, when the time comes, the soft thud of the bolt-gun, the cool release of the butcher's blade.

Psychological Profile for Zeus (aka Jupiter, Jove, The Thunderer... etc...)

His penchant for titles and his insistence on an abundance of epithets whenever his name appears in print, suggests an inferiority complex; likely the result of an overshadowing father who never gave him enough time. His decision to associate himself with the symbolic imagery of mountains, thunderbolts and oak trees, suggests that he is the product of a broken home, craving stability and eager to assert his own authority within a strict hierarchical structure. In all likelihood he is at the centre of a confused family dynamic. Competitive siblings, his own wayward children and his sense of having been forced into an unhappy marriage will all have led him to seek gratification elsewhere.

Which brings us to the crimes themselves. What to say about a young girl abducted from a beach – carried away by a bull, hunched and steaming through the waves? Or a woman, feeding the ducks in her local park – all she remembers is something like a sheet thrown over her, the terrible weight of feathers. His obsession with animal forms suggests a misguided attempt to appeal to some kind of ‘natural order’. Unfortunately this is reflective of wider social trends. We are dealing with a peculiarly sick mind. His recent appearance as a ‘golden shower’, coupled with his recorded history of using floods and storms as ‘punishments’, leads us to conclude that the perpetrator is a persistent bed-wetter, incapable of spending a night on his own.

Zeus as Cuckoo

According to Grimm's Teutonic Mythology Zeus may have originally been worshipped as a Cuckoo Deity

A strange nest to hatch in: cold stone, silks,
such sweetness on his tongue.
He blinks his dim and roving eyes against the light.
Around him – other bodies, purple sheened
and curled in shells of sleep.
From between the pillars – a flutter
of spirits bringing food and wine.
He opens his cavernous throat. He is hungry.
They are beautiful, moving like water, like air.
He could bite their heads off,
one by one.

He is growing in his sack of mottled feathers;
he is hungry, his red throat gapes.
He shuffles between them – these other bodies –
and out to the parapet, where a storm is prickling the sky.
He answers the wind with his own sonorous sigh.
Come winter, he will turn into a hawk,
but for now he heaves his bulk back into his nest
and shoves the sleeping titans from their mountain-top
one by one.

The Cuckoo Revel

They are in the trees. No,
they are *in* the trees,
swaddled in knots, packed
tight in the grain of the wood.
We tap the bark
and listen for the echo of their call.

When we fell the trees, we fell them gently,
stack logs in the clearing like shaping
a crooked nest.

All winter we listen
for the rasp of feathers under snow.

They are loosening now. The wood is light.
We pack its hollows with straw

and the flames rise. High above –
the first green buds like stars.

But no cuckoos rise. No rush
of grey feathers in the smoke.

We are in a green wood
but it isn't summer. A featherless wind
rattles from tree to tree.
They are here somewhere.
We will go on searching.

through the root-hairs and into your veins.

Listen, this is your heart beating

in your body, where you left it.

Galdra

*Noun. Old Norse. 1: A spell or incantation. 2: The wailing made by an oracle or seer.
3. A keening sound made by a bird.*

I hear a scream in the stone-quiet trees
as I tread the empty paths of the ash plantation.
The wind casts its biting spell.

Trees in rows like spears or fingers.
No underbrush, no place for birds to hide,
but I hear a scream in the stone-quiet trees.

A strange order where forest used to be.
And high above, the snow-line brushing for fingerprints
where the wind casts its biting spells.

When they first broke the surface they found bones
tangled in the white mass of roots
They say a scream was heard through the trees.

The soil is thinning now, the trees are stunted
and I am the only one left walking the paths.
I suppose it must be me screaming in the trees.
I cast a biting spell.

Nightbird Riddles

Barn Owl

Follow me, your pilot light –
a single bulb left swinging
over fields.

Step into the grip and weight
of my orbit. The silent pressure
of my wings can ward off storms.

Don't be afraid. Even in this deep wood
I glow from hollow trees.

Step inside.

Where your eyes fail, follow
the screeching hinge of my call.

Woodcock

Even by day I am invisible
so please tread carefully
as I do.

I never cross fallen logs,
I've memorized my zig-zag
flight path
 through the trees.

You should too.

I am neither bat nor frog.
You're cock-sure enough
to call me stupid;
but I know exactly where I am.
Do you?

Tawny Owl

Do you know where you are, or who
you can now hear?

I have already sounded out
several deaths tonight. To wit:
three mice, one stoat and a magpie who
strayed too close to my nest.

Just like you.

If you wish to speak, clasp your hands
as if in prayer or supplication.

I might look kindly
on the blind glint of your eyes.

Nightjar

Your eyes are no use here
out beyond the trees.
You can hear me through your feet.
Don't mind the tussocks and stumps –
keep moving.
I am the night's dynamo
gaining momentum.
You hear an engine nearing
fading
see two lights flashing close.
But there is no road for miles.
Keep moving,
I will help you. Here,
follow my voice
jarring the night apart in front of you
then weaving it tight as you pass.
Reach out, grab a thread.
Pick it up where you can –
it has no beginning
or end

Magpie Words

Was it in the speckle-shelled before
that he spliced a thread of his blood
with the first inkling of who we are?
Or was it during that first hungry yawn
that he slipped in, as insect or grub,
and grazed our throats with song?
I do not know, but I know that my love
for brightness comes from a darkness
in my gut, where consonants chatter
and knot together, and vowels gape
like empty nests.
I know that when I creep in to crack
a hoard of shining eggs,
I can already taste a bitter drop of blood,
like the beginnings of a word,
pooling in the curve of my tongue.

Heron

Old, broken tent of a bird
found at dawn,
buckled poles,
twist of canvas,
the river risen up around it
overnight.

Long forgotten
totem-pole of a bird,
creaks and leans
across the river's flow.
Unblinking eyes
like a fire's last coals.

Heavy smoke-signal of a bird
rises at dusk,
packs up its stillness
and weight,
hauls its new, loose shape
over trees and water.

Spell for Summoning a Rain Bird

Dress in a cloak of oak leaves,
wear a bright red cap.

Paint your arse the colour of a lightning bolt
and flash it as you run.

Knock your head against a tree.
Knock your head against a pylon

until the lights begin to flicker.
Keep on yaffling...

Can you hear?
The rains are about to come.

The Scarecrow on Superstition

On Astrology

‘As above, so below’. Makes perfect sense to me
I’m down here because there are crows up there.

I mean, we shouldn’t take it too far.
We all know what causes earthquakes and storms;

but then there are those days
when every single person who walks through the field

loses a shoe in the mud.
That sort of thing takes planning.

On clear nights I often think
that I’m staring up at pin-holes of light

in the dark sack-cloth face
of a huge, laughing Scarecrow in the sky.

On Luck

This is how you think of it: something small
that can be carried, hoarded
in a pocket or around your neck.
I once found myself wearing a coat
with an old coin tucked
into the lining; the pattern worn down
to a blotched wren.

Why would something as indefinable as luck
fit so snugly in the palm of your hand?
Why a pebble, a feather, a leaf
and not a single barb or cell,
a whole forest or a stony river bed?

Maybe I have charms that I carry with me:
a hoop of crows skulking in the hedges,
a seed working its way through my leg,
tatters of cloud that clump and grow
and scatter as the rain I wear like a cloak.

On Politics

So, you would have me choose
one crow from another, one grain
from an ear of wheat
and expect it to make a difference?
A month of sun would still dry the field
to husks. A storm
would still empty the sky.

I'd still be here.

I'm sorry, I shouldn't be cynical.
I could choose that stone
because I've heard it will shift
and make the wall collapse.
I could choose that leaf
because I've heard it will dance
before it hits the ground

and maybe that would be the start
of something. I've heard
of your 'butterfly effect'.
I'd choose a butterfly
if I could find one.

On History

Battles and Kings... Buckles and pins...
Every year they plough up the same old tat
and every year you come grubbing around
in the mud with your incessant bleeping.

Battles and Kings... Buckles and pins...
That oak has a musket ball lodged in its bark
and you think that's a part of its history?

There's a fungus that's been twining
through its roots, sharing the same food
for the past six hundred years
and they barely consider each other acquaintances.

Gospel Oak

I am all edges

my heart

long since given out

to a dark tunnel,

a crooked body-width of air.

I harden round it

layer by layer.

Snow fills it,

wind and leaves come and go.

I deal in absences.

I grow.

I have enough room

to fit a body

if it hunches over in prayer.

The Green Man

Now I appear in beams,
now in door-frames, the edges
of bookcases and chairs.

I don't know why I am inside,

in drawers, in wardrobes,
in floorboards' warped whorls.

Nothing but flat surfaces,
no boles or branches.
And varnish, Christ! My face
compressed, contorted,
eyes sealed open and nothing to do
but stare at ceilings,
willing the wood to grow.

Nothing to look forward to but the sun
drying my mouth into a crooked grin.

Time is sanded down, one day
into another. I split
through paint on window sills;
splinters bloom, while outside
the first leaves unfurl.
Somewhere, the first leaves unfurl.

LINES OF FLIGHT

Why should I move in straight lines, any more than swallows do?

– Jeremy Mynott. *Birdscapes*.

Peregrini

I set myself adrift
 in a coracle upon the sea
circling on tides
 and prayers
and tar-soaked skin.

I was lashed to the oars, braced
against the wicker-work,
 feeling the wave tips
for the channels to the grey edge of the world.

The islands appeared through the spray
like cataracts in my salt-scorched eyes.

I have known such depths of water
and such depths of sky –

each day the waves beat through the sea stacks
and clouds piled up to the stars.

I learned to measure the time by the moon
and the months when laver and kelp
were thrown up onto the cliffs.
But there was another, slower time

of rainwater filling a row of clay pots

and strips of fish drying and curling on the stones.

At night I lay under the shell of my coracle,
listening to the rush of gulls
returning to land the wing-beats
in my blood

and I set myself adrift
circling
 through the sky's fathoms.

St Ronan's Chapel

after Kathleen Jamie

The stones give no answers.
The cracks in the mortar admit only threads of sky.
Stone bench,
stone altar;
if there were books they would be bound in stone.

No sound finds its way down the long, low tunnel
to shelter from the wind –
not the storm petrel's lost-soul laughter,
not the seal's soft wailing
stretching over the surrounding waters.

All we know is that *Ronan* means *little seal*,
as though one of those creatures,
wondering at the new shapes crossing
the straits, the lights on distant cliffs,
rose one day and walked inland,

shedding blubber and fur in the milk-white shallows,
taking a new skin of rough cloth
washed ashore in a storm.

And perhaps this darkness and silence
is not the result of a man's search for wilderness,

but an attempt by something wild
to turn its back on the light of the sky
and the clamour of the waves,
to see its world through our eyes,
hear it through our ears.

The Stone Boats of the Saints

We need no wind for our stone boats,
we don't need to wait for the tide.

We need no canvas, no pitch, no rope
no benches, no ballast, no oars.

We need no tools for our stone boats,
they are already there, by the sandless shore –
black granite hulls among the limestone's grey angles
like weights and measures
left over from the workings of the world.

We are searching for beginnings –
thumb-prints on the cliffs,
the first sketches of islands beyond the rim of the sea.

We have no charts to find our way.

We need no moon, no stars,
just our stone boats seeking out fellow stone.

We haul them into the slate-grey waters.

Our path lies ahead of us, bright as a seam of quartz.

Floki and the Ravens

We packed kegs of salt-pork in the hold,
sacks of barley, crates of liquor.
No one knew where we were going, or how far.
Our captain, Floki, brought no maps, just turned up

at the dock with three ravens in a wicker cage.
He released the first a week at sea – it turned
and flew straight back the way we'd come.
We halved our water rations and journeyed on.

The second was set loose in a thick sea mist.
It wheeled around the boat for days until, one night,
it disappeared.
Months at sea and the empty barrels were tipped

over the side. We watched the last bird hungrily
as it was fed the final scraps. It perched on the bow
and flexed its wings, then dipped over the edge
and skimmed the wave-tips towards the sinking sun.

We were ready to turn
on our captain when a shout came from the mast-head:
first cliffs, dark against the sun,
then three ravens, dark against the cliffs.

St Peter and the Storm Petrels

Footsteps on the water.

Dawn clear as prayer.

Bodies hanging over water

like small, dark beads.

How long have they been out there
treading slowly across the bay,
staring down into the salt-clear distances,
scrying for storms?

There was a time when saints walked on water.
We saw them, like bright lights crossing the bay
leaving trails of taut, still water
marked with footprints.

They left long ago, turning west
on their weightless march,
leaning into the heft of the waves like restless ships.

We still wait for them to return,
but perhaps, lost or driven mad by such winds,
such distances,
this is what they have become –

petrels hanging over the water,
staring down as if in wonder
and pattering their ragged dance

to the distant, scudding footfall of storms.

Sea Augury

Here, at the furthest point from land
we pitch containers from the deck

like dice the size of houses,
then wait to see what rises as the water stills.

We follow the cargo shoaling in the currents
the way the Vikings followed wooden pillars

to the beaches of their new world.

We wade ashore across a tide line of wrack and watches,

plastic bags tugging at the shallows
like tired moons.

The Estuary

Oystercatchers

Down among the mussel beds
the water is warming by degrees.

One by one
 we drift down
 from the cliffs
to huddle on the mussel beds
and by degrees
 to change.

Our heads fill with watery thoughts
the flexing of tides
 the soft clack of shells.

And, like shells, our beaks clack and grow,
broadening
 hardening
 layer on layer;

like the sand
 re-layered over winter
into new drifts and pebble beds;

like the pebbles
 turned hard and smooth
by the water's endless turning.

Turnstone

We continue the water's work, levering the damp corners

of pebbles, working the shoreline – light to dark

light to dark – until sandhoppers scatter like light through water

or we find something more worth our working.

We are proficient with eggs and bars of soap, all kinds of waste.

We can dispose of bodies – wearing down skin

wearing down bone – until, like us, they disappear

into the wrack line. You can't tell where

our movement finishes and the water's begins.

Egret

Here
and here again
my water self and I
moving from pool to pool
dragging our feet. Sand and seams
of tar billow like the winter sky. My water self
barely ruffles a feather. We are still. We feel every movement
every silvered shudder – there
and there again. I stab through myself, splitting us into bubbles
and light, into many parts, that shoal somewhere
in the shifting tide. By the time
I have gathered myself
here again, I am
alone.

Crow

Alone, the best way to be –
the only crackle of darkness on the open sand.

I come here because I can.
I can break shells, pull up ragworms,
haul away a whole dead fish.

I can recognise my own reflection.

Everything I know, I taught myself.
The water? The water is an inconvenience.
I don't like to get my feet wet.

It comes and goes, like everything else.

I suppose I should make the best of it.
I am the only constant – shadowing
the disappearances,
making whatever's left my own.

The Scarecrow on Cycles

On Migrations

This was always the arrangement:
the swallows strung out
like a kite tail, waiting for the right wind.
Sometimes a hinge of geese creaking overhead.
Only the crows left, waiting
to see if there's anything worth nicking.
I watch them until the end,
when the fields empty
and I can finally crumple shut my eyes.

But it all lasts so much longer now;
the year is stretched thin, muggy and grey.
The swallows hatch another brood,
you cut then sow new crops.
Only the crows stick to the programme
sitting there, picking leaves from the trees.
I keep watching, try
to stop my senses from fraying, my thoughts
from getting caught in the breeze.

On Seasons

Finally it comes. A change. The pimpernel turn
into bright orange absences
at the foot of the barn wall.
If I could, I'd pull my coat up to my ears.

Winter rushes in like a broom.
I hear crickets seizing up in the hedges
pond-skaters sinking
in the mill pool. Dragonflies disappear
with a twist of bright wands.

The air tightens around nests
and, like string snapping,
the birds are gone.
The soil tightens around roots.
The field blackens, but not with crows;
they are gone too. I've won.

The soil tightens round my bones. I tilt,
lose an arm; but I'm still here,
watching the end of it.
Again.

In the Fallow Year

For half of each year I have bricked-up thoughts,
rotten, forgotten-vegetable dreams.

Even so, I never remember it hurting this much
when my bones are broken up
for kindling.

I have an itch,
which could just be the mice
dragging pieces of me to their holes in the walls,
but I know it must be the first taste
of pollen. There are small white petals
trapped in the spiders' webs
under the eaves.

But this is one of the years when they let the fields go
and they let me go further,

until my clothes forget their shape
and all my thoughts are stretched
and warped
into dark beams and slabs
of dust-thickened light
pushed under the door;

until all I remember of the world
is the moss gathering in my nose and mouth,
a few green shoots pushing through my chest
and the wood-piles rising, like a pair of lungs
expanding and holding their breath.

Unidentified Bones

All that they found of me:
three vertebrae,
 the curve of a jaw,
a clutch of teeth and knuckles,
one rib, an inch of femur
sewn into the river.

I had already forgotten myself
when they sent divers
 sieving through the murk.

My memories hang just below the surface
like air trapped in tin cans and jars.

There was a young man with an average height
and an approximate time of death –
a figure sketched
 from scrapings of bone marrow
and the guesswork of a coroner's report.

I must have lost my way by the river.
The water filled my shoes with a sudden gulp

of cold and grit, before warming to my blood.
I let the current curl around my calves.
My skin was rasped away on rocks, my nerves
unravelling over flood plains.
The dredgers trawled the bed for days,

but I was knotted into willow roots,
braced inside the shafts of reeds.

Sometimes I dream of a body:

a nest of bones wrapped in plastic,
packed in a numbered box.

Sometimes I feel them

trying to piece me together –

the cold metal tools,

the sterile warmth

of latex-gloved hands.

Sightings

Every storm brings a haunting.
When the rain stops, the river muscles
slick and brown through the valley,
carrying its old and its new ghosts.

Wax jackets and scarves rise to the surface
amongst the broken rafts of sticks and creepers.
Upstream there could be shipwrecks
just around the bend.

There, where the water eddies,
the curved backs of fishermen appear,
endlessly hauling in their catch;
and there, near the bank, a woman walks
in small steps, her clothes dark
and tightening round her arms and legs;

and once, in the deep pool
before the bridge, a train carriage idled
for a whole day, its doors silted shut,
its passengers quietly waiting,
checking their watches
adjusting their fur-coats and hats.

The River

Dipper

Strange, finding a voice down here
among pebbles and the pull of water.

I duck under,
shouldering the river's weight.

Strange, this dark curled thing, darting
through the shadows of the river bed
into the coils of a water-snail's shell;

I grab it, bring it to the surface
unfurl it in the empty air.

Kingfisher

I draw energy from water
diving through its copper coils
letting its colours cling
until I glow.

There is iron in the rocks
fish appear like nodes of tin.
I am magnetised
storing a body-weight
of the river's movement

until it crackles free
in a bolt of blue
leaping from tree to tree.

Grey Wagtail

Up down up down up
I am the river's telephone exchange
moving from rock to rock
searching for a clear line.

Do you hear that buzzing?
It is almost

indistinguishable from the river's rushing.
I tune myself in
to this movement, bobbing
into stillness and silence.

There, do you hear that buzzing?
A voice is rushing

down this long copper wire.

Swallows

Who are they, down there,
packed in the river bed like stones?

We skim lower, cut
brief holes in the surface, peer in.

Our winter selves.
We've never seen them this close
or so still.
We have only ever glimpsed them
across the sea
pinging on telephone wires
in the desert heat.

We should be shivering,
tensed for flight;

but it is still warm here.
We skim closer to our winter selves.
They are hushed, untroubled.
The water isn't even cold. We skim lower.
Duck under.

Peregrines

This is how to return:

with the barest flicker of the wind,

letting the blade of my wing fold the distances
between cliff and church spire,

letting the channels of my skull pick out tides
and breakers in the city's judder and rush.

I have maps,
but they are only aches in my muscles,

shudders down the length of my spine.

I know that as soon as I arrive

I am already elsewhere – leaving grids
and coordinates scratched in the stone,

compass points hidden
in rings of feathers and small bones.

EXIT STRATEGIES

Consider the political implications of climate disruption. What if it's not a huge catastrophe... but a real drag, one that goes on for centuries?

– Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought*.

Augury with Rubber Ducks

In 1992 a container of 28,800 rubber ducks was lost at sea. Most of them are still out there...

Teach us of the roulette wheel of storms,
of gyre systems, tide systems, the strange currents
that we have heard are brewing out at sea.

Teach us of life beyond shipping lanes, of movement
shaped by water, of seams worn thin by water,
of the fathoms seen through painted eyes.

And, years from now, when you arrive on scattered beaches
teach us of the ice that locked you in for lifetimes,
repackaging you as bright yellow sediment.

Teach us how you shrugged the ice-melt from your backs
as you rejoined the rising water, the unknown patterns of water.

Teach us of endurance. Remember us

as you navigate the empty shipping lanes, the new geographies
of plastic that we left gathering, gathering.

Lesson XXXVII: Alternative Methods

If I could do it all again would I do it differently: elbow-deep in the entrails of a goat; the murk of blood and old food; the horror of it cooling to a last warmth?

Or would it be this: not organs, but old bones; the clack of jaws; the dull shriek as I saw them up for dice?

I could have spent the years warm and dry in a library; trawling through books of numbers and cryptic verse; the only calluses on my hands from endlessly thumbing through the vellum.

But I think I would have become too fascinated by fire. Sometimes, even now, I like to stare into a candle then watch the flame inscribing patterns over the walls. There's no sound to match a city in conflagration. Nothing smells quite like a pile of burning books.

I'd have nothing to do with water. All that movement. I feel sick just taking a walk in the rain. All that stillness. A pond holding trees and sky. And there I am, floating face upwards. And all I can see is how old I've become.

Why would anyone want to talk to the dead?

Do I have regrets? I suppose it didn't have to be birds. But what else? Nothing lumbering. Nothing that needs looking after. The chickens are bad enough. And what else has the effect of the shadow of a hawk over parliament? A parliament of rooks forming at a funeral?

I need sweeping statements. Migrating thoughts. I haven't the patience for whatever the trees have got to say. Do you know some people sit in fields all day, listening to the ramblings of scarecrows?

Four Beasts

The First Bear

And I saw, as it were, a white bear
crossing the dark edge of the town,
dragging a rubbish bag like a dead seal.
It moved silently,
while the weight of its scent
silenced all dogs for miles.
It lingered, outshining the lights
of parking lots and forecourts,
lost in the greys and browns of the world.

And I saw, as it were, not a bear
but the ghost of a bear
and the first of many,
gathering at the edges of the town
like the snow
that hasn't fallen in living memory.

Flood Spiders

When the waters rose, the spiders rose like smoke
into the trees.

The trees like snuffed candles
punctuated the flood plain.

The flood plain dimmed
to deep water.

The rain came sudden as an eclipse. In windows
and doorways children watched drops the size of light bulbs
darken the broken soil.

Inside, adults gathered
what could be carried to higher ground.

Outside, the spiders rose through the rain.

They began lightly, joining twig to twig
branch to branch

then spooling whole trees
in darkening thread
until the trees swelled and warped like half-filled balloons.
The spiders tightened their threads

as a wind troubled the surface of the water
and, one by one, the trees untethered from their roots
and rose into the sky.

From the hills the people watched
the emptiness of water.

In the sky, the spiders slackened and flexed their threads,
guiding their vessels towards the horizon.

In the Everglades

Silence
of water. Silence
of small mammals and frogs.
Silence of deer, picking their way
through the shallows. Somewhere
something gathers the silences, coiling
them into bulk and length. There are trails
in the water, wide as dragged sacks of meat.
Once, one was found burst open –
a whole dead alligator sprung from its insides
like a steel trap.
But the trails are broader now and, at the end
of the day, all nets and snares are found
torn from their moorings. Silence
of foxes. Silence of bobcat
and panther – deeper
than the usual silence.
Night closes over
the everglades
swallowing
it whole.

The Wolves of Chernobyl

You ask about the wolves. The reports are unclear,
but it is said that they are without number.

When they run the long, empty roads
it is as a dark rush of water.

When they reach the town they flood the streets,
stalk the bare rooms like shades. The hollow shells
of churches and train stations fill
with the heat of their breath.

You ask of their hunger, the strength of their jaws.
It is said that the forests are stripped of their bark,
that the graveyards are turned to churned earth,
splintered wood and bone.
It is said they are digging deep in the hills.
There is nothing to be done.

The wolves can sense all movement for miles.
No one walks near the fence at night.
Drivers keep their eyes on the road,
their windows wound up tight.
They know what bristling, breathing darkness
stalks beyond the headlights' arc, beyond
the singing wire.

But you ask about the wolves – what do they know?
It is said that they sit at the mouth of the mines
for days and nights,
staring into the flooded depths.

You ask about their eyes. There is nothing I can say.
They have gazed into the light at the end of the world,
then turned and walked away.

Odin's Ravens

There used to be just two, loosed at dawn
– like flinging a pair of shutters open –
to gather the news on the wind.

Now a clamouring fog of ravens mobs him
full of the new twists in the knot of the world.
He stands on his mountain top, barely has time
to gather the loose rubble of his thoughts
before another is back, squabbling
fretting, jostling for room.

Nothing but feathers, beaks,
the hot stench of bodies.
He can't remember when he stopped listening.

Bones of Birds

Archaeopteryx

Was I the first?

It never felt that way to me.

You found a single feather

or rather, a feather-shaped absence

that you filled

with scurrying lizards

splays of wings.

Soon, you were seeing dinosaurs

perched in your garden hedge.

And you want to put a label on me!

What is a bird anyway?

I've never seen one.

You look for answers,

dusting round my outline;

but I'm a contortionist, wrapped

in the great chain of being,

ready to wriggle free.

Great Auk

How did you lose your grip on me?
I never flew, moved slowly over rocks.
But you knew that, didn't you?
You knew the uses for my constituent parts:
necklaces
a cloak made from two hundred skins and beaks
thousands of kegs of oil
jars of bait
too many feather beds to count.

Then you gathered the last of us, coddled us
like a pair of stuffed toys,
tried to stick us back together with pins and glue.
Well, I am watching you
as you work out the price-list
for our remaining stock.

Asian Barred Owl

I make a tidy profit.
My feathers cure aches and cramps,
my flesh and organs are removed –
all except my eyes, which follow
my bones into the pan.

I make a good, clear stock.
I don't remember what I was –
I am reduced, boiled down
to my perfect vision.
Take a drink and see.

Starling

When was the last time you saw me?
Not this ragged sack of feather and bone
but how I was –
fleshing out the evening sky
blanketing city centres, fields
like a dust storm.

Think carefully, when was it?
How many years?
You walk out to the crumbling pier.
That sound – it really is a phone in the distance;
That flickering sheen
is just oil on the water.

The Final Lesson: Retirement Plans

You'll know when it's time. You'll hear muttering in the corridors, like lengths of rope being uncoiled and cut to size. Scaffolding will appear and no one will tell you why. You'll hear popping on the phone line. Friends will stop returning your calls. Your letters will arrive days late, crinkled at the edges, re-sealed with glue. When you reach the back door of the minister's offices, someone will have changed the locks.

Don't let them know that you know. Carry on as usual. Make plans for the coming weeks. Even better, let them think that you're losing it. Go out with no socks. Stand all day at the end of your street, mouth open, staring at the sky. Then one night, just leave. Tell no one. Take what you need from your locker at the bus station, your box buried in the allotments. Send anything that you have to the newspapers – stolen files, diaries, taped meetings – this should buy you some time.

Pick a direction and walk. Walk until you reach the mountains. Walk until you reach the sea. Walk until you reach the house that you bought long ago and have kept under a different name. Sleep with your money under your mattress, broken egg shells round your bed. Wake early and watch the road for strangers. Watch the skies. Watch until the gulls flying over are nothing but gulls, the pigeons in the fields nothing but an easy meal.

Wait, like the last time this happened. Over the horizon, cities will rise and fall. Like the tides. Like the leaves falling from the hedges. Like the birds returning, year after year, until one cold bright day they will bring new messages, like voices over the radio, suddenly clear after a long night lost in static.

The Death of Calchas

I rose early, washed and dressed, shaved
with a newly sharpened blade. The metal dug
into my skin like a spade, drew out
nothing but small red seeds.

I walked bare-legged among boulders
where vipers were coiled in the sun like springs.
But they didn't even twitch as I passed.

A sudden storm raged and I made my way
into the eye of it –
a small shape vanishing in turbulence and din;
but the wind shucked off me like a cloak.

And a tortoise fell from the sky
and missed me by metres.

And none of my servants could get hold
of any poison.

And even the mean back-streets were bustling.

And now, as the day sinks further into the sea
I know, for the first time, what it's like to be wrong.
Funny

how this laughter grips me,
like reassuring hands around my throat.

Tiresias in Hades

'His faculties are unimpaired, for dead though he is, Persephone has granted him, and him alone, continuing wisdom. The others there are mere shadows flitting to and fro.'

– *The Odyssey* Book X, L492-5

- Shhh... I can hear something.

- Yes, we hear it too.

- Not that, that's just you moving. Why can't you ever keep still?

- That scraping?

- Yes. It's the ferryman. Back already...

- The ferryman! The ferryman! It's been too long!

- Shhhhh... I can't hear water. Just the ferry grating against the sharp pebbled bed.

Four Burials

Earth Augury

When the Ming Emperors divined
the site for their tombs
they chose the place for its good dark soil

its rivers spreading from the mountains
irrigating the fields below.

Now the drills bite deep into dust
take samples to be separated,

tested with chemicals. The results
are always the same: the soil is good
for burying the dead.

The Scarecrow's Death by Fire

Don't feel guilty. I don't bear grudges,
even though I saw you building the fire
weeks ago, laughing and joking
like it was a perfectly normal thing to do.

Now here you are, pinning slips of paper
to my clothes, whispering your sins
through the hollows of my head.

What you want me to do with them,
I don't know. Where do you think I will go?
You stare so intently as my body starts
to fill with smoke, then kick with sudden shocks
of flame. And, for a moment, I lose myself,

then wake, woven into your clothes and hair.
Your words ring in every sound,
as I flake from the underside of branches,
as I am raked into the still-warm ground.

Sky Burial

I will become pollen

and sand

sheep's wool hooked on wire

thistle heads, torn roots of thrift

twigs and feathers

talons, beaks and feathers

silhouettes in the sea drenched air.

I will become cumulus and altostratus

cirrus and mackerel sky

troposphere, mesosphere, ionosphere

storm after storm

after storm