

The Ghoul Box: An Affective Eco-poetics of The Anthropocene

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SUMMARY


The Ghoul Box is a collection of poetry which explores the complex entanglements and affects of the Anthropocene – a proposed geological age defined by the impact of human activity on the global climate and the biosphere. The collection strives to convey a sense of anxiety related to our increasingly fraught relationship with the environment and a pervasive sense of crisis, while exploring the sources of this anxiety.

My reflective essay discusses the development of my collection from my initial interest in shifting concepts of nature and ecology towards a more experimental exploration of energy, complexity, chaos, assemblage, and self-organization. I interrogate ideas of environmental melancholia, negative capability, and affective ecopoetic techniques. My research of nature poetry, environmental poetry, and ecopoetry informed the development of my collection, and I examine this impact at length.

The Anthropocene is a relatively recent concept but one with increasing influence. My poetry collection addresses the notion of complex interconnections across time and space, between the local and the universal, the personal and the social, through the frame of the Anthropocene. It offers a new perspective on our modern age – one which mingles memory and myth with technological mediation and immediate experience to form a novel image of our contemporary environmental and existential crisis.

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

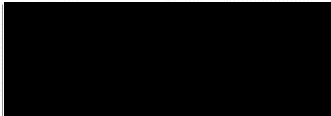
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STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated.

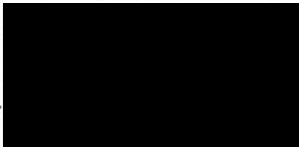
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CONTENTS

Summary	2
Declaration	3
Acknowledgements	5
<i>The Ghoul Box</i>	6
Critical Essay	92
Areas of Research	94
<i>Initial concerns</i>	94
<i>Environmental grief and affect theory</i>	97
<i>Ecopoetry, ecocriticism, and ecopoetics</i>	101
<i>Complexity, chaos, and assemblage theory</i>	123
<i>The Trouble: Anthropocene discourses and mediated nature</i>	125
Process and Methods	132
<i>Techniques towards ecopoetics and Anthropocene affect</i>	132
<i>Embodying ecology: concepts and themes</i>	146
<i>Chaos and the process of assemblage</i>	163
Conclusion	169
Appendices	171
Bibliography	201

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The Ghoul Box

Contents

Part 1

Catfish	10
The Ghoul Box	11
Creation	12
Crawlspace	14
Feasts & Blessings	17
Flood	18
Origin	20
Nightshift	22
José	24
The Guadalupe	25
Myth Of Descent	26

Part 2

Entropy	29
Burial Chamber	30
Liminal Taff	31
Boy Naturalist	33
Buffalo Nickle	34
Woodpeckers	36
The Museum Of Natural History	37
The Little Zoo	38
Succession	40
The Sleepwalkers	41
The Caretaker	43
To Be Wild And Fear Fire	45
Sawmill	46

The Age of Fish	48
Air Quality Report	49
Pitch	50
Firm Biology	51
Good Fear	53
Tupelo, Mississippi 1936	54
Adagio	56

Part 3

Dreaming In Edward Abbey Country	58
Opening the Door	59
Bold Jumping Spider	60
Leckwith	61
Sister	62
Splott Market	64
Spring Psalms	66
The Gulls	67
Kindred	68
Britain by Train	70
Birdwatching	71
Holy Land	74
Dispossession	76
At Tinkinswood	77
Meadowlark	80
Settlements	81
Landscape with Bats	85
Galveston Remembered	86
Virga	88
Arizona in Winter	89

Part 1

I found a bobcat dying in the road
and stole the tattered remnant
of its soul.

John Burnside, 'Transfiguration'

CATFISH

At thirteen I am just taller
than a five-foot-long catfish
drawn from the deep-green

river. At night, in porch light,
its rubbery body is hung by the gills

and I am roused from sleep and posed,
barefoot, to be photographed, and told
to stand up straight

so its thick, dripping tail touches my ankles,
so its slick barbels twitch to my waist,
so its empty grey eyes gaze at eye-level,

so its wide wet mouth hangs open, aghast, uttering
mute allegations.

So, this is how they measure a big fish
against a young girl,
comparing length to height, as if proof
they are alike

in their mud-tasting
and their imagining

in their reluctance
to be brought face-to-face
with monstrosities.

THE GHOUL BOX

I pried a dragonfly
 from a truck grill
and stored its paling body
in a clear bag in a metal box

with a sun-strangled butterfly found
 dust-becoming on the windowsill
and a grass-throng nest with
fractured eggshells and knots

of horsehair caught
 on barbed wire, small bones
of small beings, feathers
of raptors and teeth of wild pigs,

an aborted chrysalis shrunken
 on the milkweed.
I sought for the box any
inert beetle, any shattered cathedral-wing,

any bygone beast's bone or claw.
 Once, from a rusted barrel, a boon
of three tails from three squirrels
of varied shades, as much a miracle

as a lizard in the cat's mouth
 which detached part of itself willingly. I found
that lifeless fragment writhing, and waited
for it to still itself, the shadow
of an impulse.

CREATION

Ocelot made
of papier-mâché

with glossy rosettes

sprayed on thin
skin of news—

—print, forming
unbending limbs,
pawless open

ended vision in

fevered night
an animal fact fast
eyes fixed in nocturnal sight irises
stilled in senseless perception

naïve I knew

in a small precious way
the imminent danger
the children

created
effigies

aligned to dwell around a great
hollow tree

rooted to a thatch of AstroTurf
a parrot's wings a
cherry-red

feather cape
boa emerald green
serpentine duct
tape rope flat black
hairless
ape

polyester polystyrene paste
acrylic paint googly eyes glue wires
lodged
in blocks of foam and wrapped and
wound

habitat is home body is homage
 canopy a vast very bad copy of a body
 built on bone and
 subject to destruction
 a selection

 of poisonous frogs from plastic bubbles
 bought for a quarter turned out at the corner shop
 sit and whistle among acrylic thistle nothing
 belongs more than the young longing

to
 touch
 the rough skin of the tall trees and hear the bellow
 of howler
 monkeys

 but then the grind
 the growl of gears the gnawing
 machines shake pollen down and fairies skate board
 along the vines to stop them
 fly at top speeds I could hear
 hip-hop over a recording
 of chirring and purring of jungle
 beings

 and rain falling
 out the window in the forest dropping into
 muddy puddles splashing as
 a man sets a trap and another turns a key
 and turns towards the trees and lies
 in wait like the animals who belong here

 for the ocelot her ears are up she listens
 to the macaw the click of beetles the other line hums
 exhales a breath of petrol and her
 lustrous fur gleams the trees becoming lumber
 becoming pulp boxes fill and fall apart
 but will remain

useful we agree we think what can we make as the rain
 picks up and
 the headlines
 from yesterday's news
 come
 bleeding
 through.

CRAWLSPACES

1.

The old barns are occult places
where down below and up
above are equal in rot and slow ruin.
Something stirs in stillness. Brown dust
lifts in the rafters
as puffballs blossom in long pastures.
Weight is shifted
in order to achieve balance. Impossible
acts. The scarred knee caps
of those who've slipped through
the narrow gap. These are
the two worlds
merging into one.
This is what stirs. Always the slur
of Summer into blind, harsh
Winter. And Spring, divined first
by Fall.

2.

O World
of dust, fouled mud, dirt, must,
filth, films of grime, fine grey
grit engrained in every
surface, follicles of hay,
even the sugar cubes
tucked safely away inside
a paper bag, inside
a metal bin become
filthy.

3.

The horses shed
each Spring. Horsehair sticks
to tack, bits and leather bridles.
Horsehair rises in light
spilling through slits.
The horses buck
and kick as the whip's lash
licks their haunches. It is
bitter to watch
a horse being broken.

4.

Tracking along the fence line.
Riding, only sometimes.
When she thinks 'extend' she
presses her thighs and out fly
their legs, all four off the ground at once,
a hesitant rhythmic thundering. 'Extend' means
make more of *this* moment, means
changing time, altered tempo,
now weightless, now
lengthy breathlessness seizing space and
pressure escaping through atmosphere before
the body is released from its senses
and is flung,
then suspended for a long, long time
before a hard landing on
the frozen earth.

5.

The goat named Tex begins to bleat. Morning
glories slip open around a junked car. They mark
the morning. The trees here are old as sin

and might be breaking
under their own burdens. The gutters swim
with sunny yellow weeds. Past the stables
a woman stands with a long black whip,
in an arena and leads
her horses in circles
until they give.

6.

O World
of bruise, blood, scab,
scratch, scrape, bite. O World through which
we rise and climb, are flung and fall.
There are many methods of descent.
Gravity insists
we be belly-low.

7.

The old barns stand out in white
like loose nails unfastening from worn wood,
like a snag waiting to happen.

8.

There is always a narrow gap
between or below; some small
space reserved for those who might crawl
into that frightful place
which is limitless
and fully occupied
by shadow and lifeforms
which dangle like windchimes and drum
too many legs
to some unheard beat.

FEASTS & BLESSINGS

I was born on the feast day
of Saint Francis, who sat in Italian grasses
and preached to sheep and feral cats
and converted turtledoves in Siena,

made the snakes repent, taught
the people that the evil of a wolf is only terrible
hunger, and baptized worms while summer
storms washed them down

the gutters. He blessed
moths drawn in helplessly to burn in torchlight and
beseeched God to forgive them and the likes
of wasps, spiders, and parasites.

So much ill, he knew,
is done in hunger.

In Autumn, when the midwestern woods
looked most wooden, the mural of a wooded horizon,
deer among falling flame, the upmost limbs already
leafless and everything succumbing

to the withdrawing sun, thematically
umber, all serious and silent, with far-off ducks on the wing,
bow hunters drove their trucks home with heavy bodies in
their beds, along the pumpkin

patches leading back to town, and we,
in our own ritual celebration, followed from mass
where we had received the saint's blessing,
eager for a taste of cake, with the dogs
barking in back.

FLOOD

Waters risen almost to the porch tonight, expanding
far out, smooth and glassy, very still in a lapse, and dark, spilling

from some invisible source beyond the endless fields, some broken creek
or disjointed river, joining with our own overflowing tank, waters

from everywhere mingling, lying on the land, shivering in motes of
porch light, twitching, like the skin of a sleeping beast, pricked with rain.

Rain again. At daybreak we wade into the flooded fields
and begin to collect fish from the tall grass. We watch for rafting fire ants.

We clasp the carp and perch—easy prey, their scales like fingernails
pressing our palms, the muscles of their lively bodies flexing. Saying

we must live. We carry them in pails to an old aquarium
in the back and gently slide them in.

Sweet Home Road is washed out so we stay
put and watch TV. See semis rerouted, lurching slowly

through flooded creeks. We see big trucks follow them and flood
their engines. Currents leap over large bridges. There are arial views

of cattle being swept downstream with anonymous debris. Human beings
clinging to the tops of trees, rescue teams descending from choppers

as whole houses float past, seemingly intact. There are
many fish now crowding the murky water. They slip in

and out of its thick darkness, brushing against one another.
We hear them tapping against the glass, the whisper of their fins

as they swim back, and the rain tapping too, so steadily you might think
it is a song, might catch the tune and start to hum its melody.

ORIGIN

This was the first curse:
girl gave blood to brambles
and they let her pass.

She paid in pain from nettle spurs
in soft skin and climbed
from the valley with knees bent
to her chest. Up the choked slopes, the harvestmen

among the pine needles ushered her on, shunting
along below the crooked wing bone
of a drowned crow, pointed down

from a metal grate, in a runoff pipe from the water tower,
towards the hillside.

Sandstone, marred
by generations of requests

for love, for renewal or the end
of despair, ritually initialled
into stone: wishes granted, prayers answered.
She hesitated,

in fear, feeling all the eyes of the woods
upon her and the weight of her want,
considered the cost of scarring

a mythic body, the power
of desire, and yet bent
and committed her name—not to love or
greatness, but to some cumbersome
object, held by her hands—then

returned back the way she had come
without resistance, different,
through an emptiness

and thereafter dreamed
she was delivered to the stone, nightly,
and compelled to carve

her name, each night aching with a pit of hunger, asking
for more, imploring, each desire echoing
off the last request, losing
itself meaninglessly
in a forest where nothing watched
and nobody listened.

NIGHTSHIFT

Night surrounds creation.
The late night radio plays
for those wakeful folk listening
behind factory doors slid

on metal frames, who form, in heat,
the small black knobs
you push to turn the volume
up/the volume down, the music
trailing ...

A father

on break pauses
in the lightlessness

of the moonless night to notice,

How quiet.

The complex quiet

which arises after midnight

out of faint and distant music.

He watches smoke
rise into the darkness

then returns
to his machine and begins

again;
its process of molding, its outputs

of excess
plastic, melted, extruded in ropes
solidifying into lumps
of twined sapphire and obsidian,
glossy like

polished stones. He lets them cool
completely and pockets them.

The lulling
clamor churns below

the sound of the radio. The acrid stench
of hot plastic. The tune
is familiar. They remember it
from when they were young. It asks again

*who do you thank
when you have such luck?*

A father labors on. The world spins
towards dawn. Remembering
and imagining:

The sun will rise.
He will return home. Now

he has opened his hands
to reveal this marvel
to them, looking
like the deep sea at night or
a cosmic black marble, a treasure
to their excited eyes,
this thing he has made
in the dark,
while his little girls were sound
asleep and dreaming.

JOSÉ

He rarely spoke and spoke
only his native tongue. He shared
the single room
of a cinderblock house
above the creek
with his wife
and young child
and worked
the cattle for the rich old white men
through the
worst of the savage heat.

And the rich old white men,
whose granddaddies
had tapped oil on that once native
land more than a century before,
congratulated themselves

on their generosity, for providing
opportunity, and shared with us
the benevolent terms
of their charity, taught us
new words,

in the long, hot hours
of our first Southern summer,
spent bathing in the cool creek water,
enchanted,

and learning
to fear snakes.

THE GUADALUPE

—the brown-green gape
of The Guadalupe, grimy smiling
emerald river, the thick
black bark
of a cottonmouth gliding
across the glassy surface.

And, after the rain
the body—
found floating

—of a woman who had
fallen in

when the river flooded and swelled
and the banks became
unstable
and the current
below the smooth surface
could not be escaped,
like the pull of enormous evil-minded
eels wrapped
around the ankles,
stealing the last
soft material of life

before
either washing
away, or washing up
and passing partly through
many wet mouths.

MYTH OF DESCENT

There is the dead
calf, half
-buried, fly-hooded and the sun
above is hungry.

There is
the bottle and the sandpit,
the swollen tongue
protruding between
black gums. There is sickness,
a brown bat face-down, drowned
in an oilslick.

There is such need.
Cactus needles
find a way
into skin because there are gaps, even here.
The sting
of a scorpion inflames, like fire
ants, alarming, on the face of things.

Heavy rain on a weak roof
rains through to the floor.
Boxes of belongings soak through and are ruined.
Black widows, seeking shelter from thunder,
build eventual empires
in the corners. Fear drives us
deeper into ourselves.

The rhythm of a rocking derrick,
the sinking sun, sucking
out of fallow earth, a slow
tempo for ill omens. Chun chun chun...
The Earth is content
to warm itself from the centre.

There is the bottle,
dead and soured whiskey, and a disused
dryer to hide it in. There is a choice
for the making. The shape of memory drapes

a long arm and leans
its lithe body across the threshold.

It is a taste
of things to come.

This is the beginning
of trying
to dig a grave in sand.

Part 2

This London once was middle sea,
These hills were plains within the past,
They will be plains again, and we,
Poor devils, babble “we shall last.”

Alfred Lord Tennyson (Unpublished.)

One heard stories—set in other regions of the baked, white
deserts—of hungry dogs and the howling food fleeing them.

Lee K. Abbott - *Era of Great Numbers*

ENTROPY

Everything is understood more perfectly now
than ever before in history.

This is due to the ongoing development of devices
designed to observe, measure, analyse, and interpret.

The human mind is one of a kind: a machine
composed entirely of honey holes with a treasury of inputs and outputs.

Science has no interest in anything but what comes next.
Its attention is trained entirely In Future.

To be perplexed now is Avant Garde and belongs to the Arts.
Things gain clarity and definition all the time.

Our cells are constantly being torn apart
from every direction. Science gives evidence of this endless provocation.

Old men age, without a hint of grace, in urban alleys
and are as easy to overlook as weeds on walls or spiders' eggs.

Most urban wildlife relies on the biological preference to ignore
nonsense. Chaos is an evolutionary survival strategy.

Industries collapse. Homes are lost in floods or to the bank.
I saw a pair of ducks sleeping in a tent just last week.

You will have noticed many damaged city pigeons
hobbling around on bubble gum nubs, begging for a handout.

In your entire life have you ever come across
a solitary, unbodied pigeon's foot?

BURIAL CHAMBER

The greywether of grazing sheep, occurring
scattered over downlands, a green light tinted
blue by eddy mist, pooling cold in pocked rock.

Transmission towers tower, beneath the feet of titans
stand stones; sleep the ages; return ritual to rock,
enigmatic, lichen-sewn, historic, solid, vital.

hands upon stone
to heave, hold, and set

what ancient kin built
the burial

who aligned it
eastward

and laid the bones
of nine hundred
bodies in the light

suggesting once more

how we worshipped

long before the birth
of the world:

the body
is mineral
built of stone
and what powers belong to stone
to be unbuilt to its
native state and obscured
to all but strata
and lonely speculation

mist pools in pocks
the breath of
bright lichen
slowly weathering

chamber
the enduring stone

in wet recesses
glutted flies

twitching

an industrial whirring
precludes solitude

transmitting
arriving

LIMINAL TAFF

A motor—
bike, death
from life
on land, spends
an afterlife in the
riverbed.

I am not alone
in stalking king—
fishers along
these banks or easily
mistaking a bright
blue scrap of plastic
tangled and twisting
on a low limb for a bird
in flight.

The eyes adjust
(as they must)
to these variations
in colour and form.

—among
the wastes at
the river's stiller
edges: a heron
and a traffic cone, children
with their shoes off and
further up
a duck dead and
floating in decay.

At the weir
all perspective is lost
to primordial sloshing, lost
in the cadences
of solvent water,

All, lost.
Into the froth
with its tremendous
stuttering flourishes

goes a bobbing tennis ball.

From the bank
a dog watches
this sacrifice
with interest.

This mortal rabble; bird and beast
and river—
immemorial.

In it, leave all
but your self
to eternity.

BOY NATURALIST

From the recollections of Hans Sloane

Two hundred wings churned
coastal air, drove down salt-stiffened updrafts. Aloft,
with pale moon-yellow legs bobbing like bait,

seamew mothers and fathers squalled, beaks
wide, clacked threats and their soft, froth-white
bodies jerked between land and sky. They dove

with wrath in their eyes. One hundred gulls bellowed
at the boy who moved among their clutches
laid out and exposed on that slim tract of cliff-top.

The grass so egg-thick, he'd remember, it required caution
and lightness of tread, an anxious dance between nests, to the edge,
stung by the terror of cracking shells, spilling

yoke or unready young onto earth;
and the birds' baleful warnings turning
to mournful wailing, to be carried

up, to drift, and die
away in the all-sounding
crush of the ceaseless surf.

BUFFALO NICKLE

Iron Tail and Two Moons

a mother notices
something about running bison

a friendly smile for a photograph
or if preferred looking
into the middle-distance
at nothing

a cloud's long spread
high and thin in the atmosphere
a performance and its
disremembered meaning

Black Diamond

a star falls on a slaughter-
house selling 750 pounds
of buffalo steak at \$2 per pound

his hundred-year-old-head hangs
yet, mounted, and tours
the numismatist circuit

A Coin in the Sand

minted in 1936 and washed up
eighty years later, half-
buried on Jacksonville Beach

with crushed clam shells
and a chip of pink
acrylic nail

below the boardwalk

and the party shop

where you spent
good money on
a butterfly knife

WOODPECKERS

Up the old gone
hollowed nameless
tree, far out in the long yard,
comes the pulse
of a pileated woodpecker.

The rhythms of its labors, the drumming
of instinct, carry to where I am
envisioning
another bird, the
ivorybill, holy grail
of birds, a vanished woodpecker

of the diabolic swamps, believed
extinct, so long unseen and unheard by any but a few
swamp-fevered locals who claim

to have witnessed
the shape of its mythic terror,
this bird too big to be believed, crossing
like a shooting star and calling
out over the damp and wild canopy
in a spectral voice; a tone, they say, torn from
stone, issuing
from the limits, the very
outer reach
of space,
through the seamless
darkness
of distant time.

THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

cast of dodo bones
how the dodo went
out of the world bet
it tasted like chicken
ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

remark now the golden
pheasant the bird painte
d so to speak so splendid
ly the splendor of a rising
sun lighting the paddy field

and remember the passenger
pigeon and other various kin
ds who had their own unique
styles habits titles histories p
roclivities natural philosophy

thylacine stuffed like
a stripped sofa this lo
st wolf of tasmania
existed long enough
to have her photo ta
ken just long enough

tiger with outpouring of
tiger blood ghost white
glass eyes victim of his o
wn power and mystique
the hunt symbolizes a gr
eat respect for regal beauty

smaller and more dista
nt than memory the we
avers of these nests hav
e been harvested for thei
r dainty feathers for man
y generations a sacredness

bright child

come gather and ga
ze up up up upon t
his strange young be
ing who though only
a baby really rises n
early to the ceiling!!

gold haloed
red ball
bouncing
dear
pleasure
in innocence

baby head
rolling
back and
forth and
back again
such simple
is unique to small children who tender
the human heart
with surfeits
of sweetness.

ball
and forth
in mourn
ing how
should I
know you?

vulture
dressed
in mourn
ing how
should I
know you?

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Viking Cruises Samsung help fund
programs
of education and conservation

Someday, perhaps, when habitat
has dwindled to nothing and all space is
otherwise occupied, what
we will finally recall
of this former life
is form.

THE LITTLE ZOO

At the little zoo,
behind the aviary, off
 the paved path, off
 the dirt trail,
behind a thicket, far
 back beyond
 the laughter
 the ice cream vendor
 the donkeys in the petting zoo
 the tigers eating frozen blood
 on a hot day

there stand several quiet cages,
not marked on the map;
cages sewn with curling vines, creating
 many shadowed corners
and only a simple plaque
 which reads: *macaques*
 retired after trials
 in medical laboratories.

And huddled and hiding in the upper dark
they turn their backs
and tug out tiny handfuls
of fur.

Their small, half-bald bodies expose
slender scars, notches, nicks
and raw-pink nubs.

Their round eyes are both alert and
vague; their glassy gaze
avoidant, as if they hold some store
of shame.

In shadow they are uncanny,
startling,
infantile.

It takes a great deal of directionless wandering away
from the paved path,
from the exotic birds and beautiful beasts,
from the excited and manic
activity of the center, to
discover
the macaques
in this silent shelter.

It is not easy
to come upon the place and innocently

wonder what might reside within, to see
them and to read the simple sign. For the unexpected,

who find it accidentally, there occurs
a momentary lapse—

when the novel pleasure of encounter
and the privilege of contact with captive
wildlife abruptly
drop away, sink to nothing,
and something denser presses up out
of that sudden space, massive, opening mutely its maw...

— only an instant, barely time to catch a breath, to think,
before the children,
with their curious sensitivity, turn
and ask their questions.

SUCCESSION

It was once a drift, a rise
and recline of desert;
the form of
sea's boundary.

But succession slowed
the sand dunes shifting
and stillness bore

a starved and seeking
otherness; to crave raw, bitter
water.

One colonial came and called another.
Another called, whispered,
*follow here and share
my shadow, my root bed.*

Salt called another. Sand drew
vipers-bugloss, low-lying thyme,

some stone-overtaking vines, some sea spurges
unsettled boundaries, redefined and set tones.

Some beetles stalling, heavily
fell with wings opened, were carried sideways
to the same climes by the same chaos,
were rearranged with sand and pollen.

Here is the faintly traced memory
of a snake's long line,
slid across the sand,

on a summer's evening,
from one slope to the next;
errata of the ever-working dune wind.

THE SLEEPWALKERS

City-stalking aberrations; a pervasive something-gone-wrongness.
Here a blood-stained figure capped with a boar's meaty head—stolen
Early this morning from the butcher—sleepwalks through the streets at dawn
Like an ancient evil, a vengeful Pork-Lord from some hellish pen, passing
People; workers who are disembarking trains and are work-bound, buried
Deep in thought, or lingering in dreams, or entirely free from thought or
Dreams, and are passing in-between without a glance.

Only from the top floor of the city's central library can you see
The plot of centuries-old tombstones standing in a lot locked between
Shopping centre exteriors and barricades of concrete. What progeny
Remains and yearns to pay their respects to the long-departed when the gates
Only open on payment to park? Some sit and gaze
Down. To view the city from this remove, they go deep
Under something like a spell of gazing. They will remain there, unmoving for
Many hours as the day light spreads and recedes over the rooftops.

A rustling from the centre. The smothering pavements stretch like an historic
Lava flow; a natural disaster beyond memory. And what souring souls are
Buried beneath? And who treads above? By day, shoppers shop, deeply
Shadowed. They walk in the light of the land of ever-sun, shine and bear the
Burdens of invisible halos which cast highlights on all the right features.

And drowsy drug-freaks who brandish mouldering blankets sleepwalk,
Instinct-led, on unseen paths, migratory routes, a new nature between fixes,
Scraps of SleepR and real sleep curled under the awnings of deserted shop
Fronts. Perhaps they dream, or perhaps they remember, or only just rest
And repair in stillness.

Above them, feral pigeons perch between deterring spikes and wait
For the first signs of their own small share in things.

Evening falls like a sodden drunk and lands hard
Among some sparse young ornamental trees in the heart of the city.
Their slender branches become the roosts
Of large flocks of tittering songbirds who

Know no better and having no sense
Of what could otherwise be, cheerfully wish one another
A good night's sleep.

THE CARETAKER

1.a.

of the last few birds
enters the compound
on a beautiful, bright morning, when the black daub leaves on the tallest trees
bleed softly
into a stony blue sky
and sunlight is suffused to a golden aura overall.

He unlocks the first padlocked door and passing through he steps lightly
into and out of a shallow foot bath. He carries a messy array
of yellow papers, some wrongly-folded, loosely under his left arm.

1.b.

The compound is a small square building behind a chain-link fence
topped with three rows of bright, new barbed wire.
It was purpose-built for the birds. It is airy; framed in wood with walls of
woven steel wire
and sheet-metal bolted at the base.
The mesh allows a gentle breeze to blow, for instance, the raw-sweet
scent of kudzu, through
and through the several interior rooms, all made of sturdy
metal-mesh and glass, each
with its own locked door.

1.c.

The caretaker stops in the hall outside one such room
and, standing half-akimbo, looks in on a sparrow
with a speckled breast and white eye stripes.
The bird hops lightly
then swiftly, down from the ledge, darts into
a density of rushes at the center of his room, disappearing.

(We see him deep within the rushes
with his feet in a pool of water,
hunting mealy white flies.)

1.d.

Later, the bird will stand in a clean bowl of supplemental food
left by the caretaker and we will notice, for the first time,
his slender ankles banded with bangles
of blue and white, identifying him, and seeming somehow
a most significant image.

2.a.

These four minutes and one second are all we have
of the last of the sparrows in this undated film; a faded reel at
least a few decades old. As these final five birds were all male,
hope for the species did not long outlast the 1980s.

2.b.

In this video, the audio is of a faulty electrical circuit, interrupted
momentarily by several shrill digital chirps and trills
towards the conclusion. Overall, there is no auditory sense of place,
narrative, or identity. However,

according to archival recordings, the song
of the dusky seaside sparrow
was a sort of slow and plaintive wheezing, like
pretty please
almost the werz of an insect's folding and unfolding wings
or the pressing together of palms.

These field recordings also capture the rumblings
of other proximate things, we can only guess at;
perhaps a steely wind through narrowing pines,
the cough of a distant engine or a rocket climbing
the sky,
or a flow of turtles scuffing
their plastrons indignantly
against fresh pavement.

TO BE WILD AND FEAR FIRE

They appear out of the burning hills
in dim, diffused daylight. At the edge of swimming pools, they lap

the bright pool water, eyes shining fearfully
and smoke seething from singed fur.

By night the old hills smoulder. Coyotes skulk and
scavenge in the urban glow. The carmine moon mirrors fire's light below.

The wild rest to tend their wounds and mend their scorch
in shadowed alleys. These refugees, these forest-dwellers

arrive by highways, out of evacuation zones or else they come
along rivulets and streams into the suburbs where

deer stand like ornaments on freshly mowed lawns. Seized
by exhaustion they watch traffic pass, passive with smoke sickness.

Rare birds chatter on powerlines, intrepidly reconnoitre, fly
as near as they dare to the dazing soot, their wild nests, their wild homes. Fire

compelling all to shake the great chain of fear; to be wild
and fear fire to madness for survival, and be driven out

of the known wilderness and breach invisible boundaries, to cross
the threshold between the realms of two terrible fears.

SAWMILL

Like Adam, first man, the first father
of men, loving the sound of a gunshot
bucking into the distance, the sound of spirits crossing
the worldly threshold, getting lost
among rough sketches of brittle twiglets, and being buried
in the buzz of fat black flies bumping against a microphone.

Like Adam, burning in the blistering sun, standing
in thigh-high, parched grass, setting
up the camera, taking aim,
adjusting the barrel's weight, whispering, *boy*
thinking, *my son*. The sky, a mellow light trapped in
polished sapphire, hanging like a mural of
unobstructed blue.

The landscape aches in its ancient state
of faith and confusion, is desiccated and prone to delirium
and portents. It sprouts bone-dry weeds. Their tangles cradle
the incendiary. On the wind: the longing
for a baby boy, a sudden
sky-blue cloud rising announces the coming son. The scrub
finds itself soon to ignite. It hears the first notes of the ritual song
of undoing, the ripping of a seam, popping and splitting, then
wailing. The brush trembles and braces against a breeze
which heralds and hisses *spark*. It holds its breath
and waits.

The final mystery of this foreboding vision is man, where man is transformed
into a flat black box, moving erratically before the flying cinder
and the smoke, before the undulating spread of flames, anonymous
until
a fleshy arm appears,
like being born,
the hand of man reaching out. Like Adam,
when he looked up into the clouds and stretched himself
towards contact with the maker, his heavenly father.

Like Adam, through the gates, not knowing
 what is to come, or what he will create
when he takes aim once again,
 and squeezes
the trigger.

THE AGE OF FISH

the coastline attests
to an age of fish impressed frozen
timelines stone-still speak
of chiral turns set in strata
like broken bones clenched between
lithic teeth
once
all was drowned oceans so vast one could not
emerge but to breath and sink
again below swam enormous swarms bodies big as landmasses
submerged and in watery shade
watched one another with
bulbous eyes
the detailed webbing
of their fins persist through time in stone
monstrous fish-kin these
many sharks and molluscs entombed while sailing
through the deep beyond
deep and expansively dark
when so little land could be found
since
the frantic world has spun around the centre
in spasmodic convulsions revolving over
four-hundred million years of passing
day and night undone
the age of fish when uncrossable oceans
belonged to creatures which exist only
as hints but who once lived and sunk
their long teeth into one another's long armoured bodies
cracked open shells until at last their own bones
sunk and settled in mud and remained there
while our same star above swung by again and again,
bringing time forward from the past
which is a dream before human being had begun
and the waters rose again to swallow mountains.

AIR QUALITY REPORT

Clouds are spread heavy and low
and the atmosphere is stuffed
with exhaust, dirty
like the hands of hardworking men
 laying tar,
 rising
thick and oily
aromatic sweet and sour
chicken warming, and
 early-blooming cherry blossoms.

What animal's death speaks so candidly
of decay? Of spoil, too vivid
in the mind, putrid
 repellent; foul seething
 from overfull bins.

Pungent mud, the choke of drifting
woodsmoke, then the fragrance
 of something washed
and hung in dampness wafts;

an essence of cotton and lavender
smothered in the redolent air, a pulse
 of chemical clarity on a film of greasy breath.

The acrid smell of burnt resin rises
from the riverside where the
thrown-away shades of men
 are getting high in the dim afternoon.

Clouds gather, grow and darken, taste
of humidity. Already,
 the pavement is secreting the sultry smell of industry,
 of grit and pitch —is opening
itself and reaching up to meet
 the coming rain.

PITCH

Pitch: to live a valuable life
and to know your own
worth, is to burn
with
ambition and desire;

so
attainable, so balanced and
so beneficial to
a healthy sense of
self and a positive life

market
like a barrel fire
fluid, combustible
wants
malleable, conforming, and
style, influence,
style.

The single-use-plastic of desire;
The value of which is more,
and the expense of which is less,
when bought
or sold wholesale.

Pitch: depression, anxiety,
and despair
crop up within
the same economies
of experience. Preferring
the same do-nothing
conditions of

sterility, the Downers
spill like clashing colours,
glazing any empty,
blank, or uncluttered
canvas.

unadorned or tastelessly decorated
and outdated space, or

spare,
home

Pitch: life is so much
less lonely, more wholly
wholesome
with the drive,
not to live
but simply to
thrive.

buy

FIRM BIOLOGY

rhi zom es
in under
growth, of bracken sp ores,
hapl oid / repeat ing:
sori

decon struct ed red bic yc le
light and plast ic
bag in under
growth

spliff lit and
discar d ed in
muddy und er
growth / repeating:
story

sorry, boy.
now say it again, and this
ti me don't sto p until
you' ve said you r
piece or else
hol d your
tong ue bit ten

thi n bloo d po oling
in gaps betwee n tee th
tast es metal lic, and yo u
spit a streak of scar let
into m ud
in unde r grow
th and notice

the rain : fe eding the strea m
the sky: fie lding thunde r

fed by rain an d nig ht,
fe rns'
haplo id or dipl oid
coll ude and

close, knitting
green fingers

as if saying something.
so sorry to see you go. I repeat
as the smoke rises up
into the street
light.

GOOD FEAR

Looking
for spiders in the first shade of the day, shake
out the blankets.

Turn sleeping scorpions out
of shoes. Cast light in dark
places.

Leaving, leap
from the stoop, and do not wake
the snakes who nest beneath.

This is good
fear. To be aware
for self-preservation,

look for
what lies unseen. Be wary
of what has folded itself
into the creases of this life,
what rests in shadow,
what is easily startled and
carries poison.

TUPELO, MISSISSIPPI 1936

She held her wailing baby to her breast
the whole, long while. She tried
to save him from the sound
of a train running down
the surrounding houses.

They would go out after
to see. They would fear
that no others had survived—a deep
and lonesome fear—to be the last alive. At first
they would struggle
to know the way
to town with all the trees gone
and the homes and places gone too. With nothing
left but mounds of splinters and debris. Nothing left
whole, only things bent,
broken, wrecked. Then, around
what remained of a stone house, they would see
a few other people
beginning to gather. When she approached
they would turn and reach out slowly to touch her face and ask,
in whispers, where had she come from and was she real.
They would stroke her hair
and when they saw the baby in her arms
some would start to weep.
Later, others brought news
that the pond was full of bodies.

She had come from beyond
the bluff with her husband

and their surviving son. She had no wish but that
they should live. When the others began to follow
the moans of those buried alive,
she would stand aside
and rock her boy.
To drown out the cries
for help, which woke all around her now, she
would put her lips to her baby's ear
and gently hum this song...

ADAGIO

The news
cannot be contained. *The lungs of the Earth
are aflame!* A raspberry-red sky afloat over
Mt. Rainier, trees burning like candles
on a birthday cake, those redwoods *so big
you could drive a car through.* Count the rings!
Now *that's* old. Older even than the cathedral
in Paris, that survivor of the one great war's fires
and the fires of the great war after, which is also now
burning up in H.D. But! Neither was Albinoni spared.
Historically, bombs relieved the libraries of their necessity. And
the manuscript? The lyric? Piles of cinders. It was
only a matter of time. What can be recovered climbs
out of the imagination, like the soft dun spore-smoke of a puffball
under the pressure of a light rain. Slowly. Next to
invisibly. This new contagion attacks
the lungs, causing acute
respiratory distress, a terrible choking. It cannot be
contained. So difficult to catch a breath.
Fill in these blanks. Keep
checking back. Continue
fingering the fret.
In the Age of Wait-and-See, we'll
all go on watching
and mourning whatever next
comes to pass.

Part 3

whispering
something to the rose
she cuts the rose

Kuroda Momoko

DREAMING IN EDWARD ABBEY COUNTRY

One late-Spring I drove way out into Edward Abbey country,
refuelled on credit, rented shabby rooms along that
long stretch of highway and hardly slept
for weeks.

I found a lot of sweating bodies clamouring to see those red rock
arches, crawling like ants at a picnic on the hills, pausing
to drink Coca Cola in the warm shade of a boulder
covered in ancient petroglyphs
of human hands.

I was dozing with the sage at the foot of a huge, brutal
butte when the landscape was suddenly made Martian
by some artifice of the ascending sun. I understood,
all at once, what I felt for the spectacle
of this world, and how loneliness
comes along looking

like antelope running at pace
with a tanker driving oil out
of the rust-hued desert.
How, as it passes,

you can sometimes catch a glimpse of some
sleek shadow circling way off at the
horizon, winding down, and down
and ever on, downward, as if
attempting to extend
an invitation.

OPENING THE DOOR

opening the door
carelessly you scared
the pigeons up
from the pavement over
the pinking
brown rooftops into
the slim white eye
of the fattening
late-winter
sun.

BOLD JUMPING SPIDER

How can I explain
how my spirit rose

up the moment I saw
her watching me

and hung mid-air, suspended
between the two of us, reached for her

in some haptic experimental yearning,
to touch and be touched. Enfolding

and holding fast in a shared
stillness and wondering?

A breeze stirred the world beyond
the windowsill and she stirred with it,

just a twitch. I witnessed light
born of nothing, a full emerald gleam.

I wanted to fall to my knees.
Something holy moved in the room.

A great pain seized me, sudden
sacred love, adoration of the Self in another.

O holy, holy, holy! How long
had I been waiting? I begged

her to call my name. To carry
me. To live on eternally. To be gone

and never return. I wanted
not to know her or else

to know her well enough
to recognize her
every time.

LECKWITH

I took you to where roses grow
sprouting through a ruined trolley, down
the road, among orchids lamb's ear
rubbish rubble rabbit bones.

In the waste and woodland,
in a cemetery of scorched bottles, firepits,
a local tip of circuit boards and children's
outgrown shoes, we cut
rosehips from the vine, collected

a bucket-full to brew
to syrup with brown sugar, and left
the bushes bare and bereft.

They rose like tied-up
bundles of twigs against
a backdrop

of rows and rows of council flats, the brown
slopes of roofs in a long line like
the backbone of a
bent and broken body, like
a dirty river running
up into the hills.

SISTER

She is in the garden with a gun.
She has chased a rat
into a phantasmagoria of fuchsia
dahlias and marigolds, trellises
of runner beans. Hummingbirds up
drifting
between the Japanese maple's mahogany
leaves. The big white hound down the road who killed
(but did not consume)
her hens still sleeps. First sunlight is thick
with the particulate of distant beings burning far
away, across state lines, which the wind has carried
a great distance.

Last night, in this corner of the world, the moon hovered
like an overripe pumpkin on a fishing line. It bobbed
orangely and unmoored.
The high beams of a lonely motorbike
were thrown among the pines in passing.
An owl was revealed, daguerreotype toned
in a flash of light, and was as quickly
forgotten. The whole world,
awaiting the dawn.

From the window I watch her. She is wearing her pajamas
still and her bathrobe, hasty, not yet dressed for the day
and I can tell she has heard it move
because she turns and lifts the rifle and quickly
fires a bullet through the mellow morning,
into the overgrown daisies in need of
deadheading. I look away

from what comes next. I will go down, now

and meet her on the porch where she is
rocking
with the gun propped
against the wall. She will say without looking at me
finally got that fucker and then something quiet
about the roses which have just
begun to bud and I will see
that she is smiling softly as if it is a pleasant dream
while her coffee has
grown cold in her hands.

SPLOTT MARKET

In this paradise of
expired seeds, expired sweets,
every dust-encrusted surface
 intrigues. Every dirty
tarpaulin contains a fascination
of broken seals, tools of yester—
 year's trades, mouldering furnishings,
 missing parts, plastic cases
sun-dimpled, warped and wilted wares, little model
households, many children's clothes,
a broken bottle-neck and rubber bands
in a linty bowl, a grandmother
 hawking a picture frame
still containing the blanched face
of a plump young grandson, and someone
 willing to buy, for the right price,
 whatever
is scattered at our feet like
seed on stone, is
 dumped from bags
and spread like manure; antique
 mobile phones, water-logged trading
cards, incomplete jigsaw puzzles, a
half-empty aquarium smeared with
 slime and neglect. In a glass
display, six stuffed songbirds surround
 a jay. In this paradise, picture
 where the forest
lies, where the ruins
 of the nests, the rivulets, the currents
of the many wandering waters

carrying slowly
the waste of an atom, distressing
the bed below, worrying
the banks, on their way
to feed lesser streams.

SPRING PSALMS

From a pollen-heavy tongue,
this slow yellow speech rolls. These words
hum, honey-thick, sweetly spiced, this spell;
to sing and taste the origin of plums.

THE GULLS

Outside the gulls unhinge
fervid expressions, throw
the rust vice voicing mechanics
from their throats.
They've come laughing
from the deserted city
where once they fed on abundant refuse,
rapacious for pastries and weekend regurgitation.
Once they were Lords of the
High Street's wrapped scraps,
local landfill, and the ancient coastal home,
where piers and boardwalks appeared
like pleasure palaces, for summer-long eyeing
of ice creams, chips, fried fish.
But when these places emptied in Spring
and remained empty at Summer's start,
the food flood could not be found
for all their soaring ghostly over the abandoned
night life. So the gulls fled
to the suburbs where there was just enough to get by.
And they made their nests, and hatched their eggs,
and raised their young on rooftops,
and taught them to sing and shrill,
and how to raid the wastes of the new world.

KINDRED

Early this morning
as I crossed the meadow,
an umber breast
 burst from a brambled
 hedge; out

and over, like a
spark ajump, high
on fire in gorse.

Two tawny wings,
 threading the pale eye of
tulle light,
 taking flight.

I beat dawn to the
 pasture and across the fence, I watched
for the change—for the night
 —tightened daisies
 to unbind their tightly
wound heads.

Glacially, white petals winked and un-wrinkled,
 pushed out as if by the pumping of
green blood warmed by the
 ochre approach of morning.

Night stooped and doubled over.
Its face hidden behind its shadowed
 shoulders. By morning I possessed
that great, ancient
 meadow-knowing.

Then, with the day upon me and morning
cracked beyond repair by the risen sun, I returned
to a home grown cold.

Yet here are your own warm, soft shoulders
outlined against the wallpaper.

My shadow fingers, twist in
painted ivy, pull an
incantation from
springing daylight.

Your body prone, as
dormant as daisies
at night; the hairs
of your arms and your skin aglow,
bright as the meadow's gathering light.

What constitutes kindred?
asks the inchworm of the orange-tip.

(The window is open on the world
and everything has begun to happen out there.)

And what then
is all this illumination worth?

BRITAIN BY TRAIN

Those ponies wrapped in blue
wool blankets, standing in the rain,
are a national treasure. So is
the blooming rape when it reaches
to the sea. Some things
I have only seen
through the window of a train; a little
owl framed in oak leaves, a fox
stalking a pheasant, mists collecting
densely in pastures like the risen ghosts
of ancient lakes. I know much is hidden
in this landscape; Roman roads, hoards
of gold, whole histories of plunder.
I wonder what generations of children have
played beneath that venerable chestnut. Once
there were wolves here which perhaps claimed
their territory at the yew long before the first human
lovers carved their names. They were hunted to extinction
on this island six-hundred years ago. How lonely
it must be for the last of a species, for that last
wolf alive, alone in the wild.
From the train, I have seen bright
balloons, escaped, floating up to high heaven, miles out
in the countryside. Once,
an old man and a young child out walking, stopped
to wave at the passing train.
By the time I raised my hand to wave back
they were already out of sight.

BIRDWATCHING

Houston, Texas

The floodwaters are finally receding in the drowned city suburb.
The city doused. The suburb drenched. Revealing new vistas
of ruin. Rinsed and turned up. Debris dragged out
of downtown. A lot of weeping and disbelief now.
Here, at today's edge of the bayou, an ibis
is stalking crayfish and small fish. It is known as a God
of death because there is a lot of death around. We are
right now in a time of death. It is a white flame
against deep green. It is a flyleaf. When it is successful, it is
the God of little frogs sliding down. Slowly
striding. Radiant patience. Humble yourself before it. Watch it
go about its dredging.

Ojai, California

I am welcomed to lost time, decades back, when
these emblems were born. A framed photograph of the Rat Pack.
Class. Shades and large-finned Cadillacs. Martinis by the pool.
Elvis in blue. Post-war leisure. All things prefab. The advent
of plastic. I am invited to step into that past at this retro motel, to sun
myself like that, poolside, and to believe again how simple
things once were. How clean-lined. How yellow-green.
How palm-treed. But I am preoccupied with watching
a pair of woodpeckers busy with their labors. They disrupt
the fantasy. They are anachronisms, flying off into the outside world,
and returning to stash acorns in the palms around the pool.

I have never seen such a thing. Industrious and single-minded.
They reject the past entirely. They are preparing
for whatever the future might bring, with their
army of a thousand oaks...

Chicago, Illinois

She goes to cemeteries in the city to study birds. That is her research.
She notices how they perch on headstones and records it. She knows
these places well. She takes me there, shows me her favorite grave,
one with a glossy ring of petrified tree rather than a stone marker.
I recently saw something similar in an art gallery, I tell her.
A collection of petrified trees. Whatever that means. I believe
she already knows what we will find here. She has seen most things. Still,
she is surprised by a certain song. We follow it like little children
in a fairy-tale, lured by magic. Ever deeper and
the trees grow denser. We lose sight of the city skyline.
We move quickly and quietly among the dead. We emerge
into a clearing where the song is ringing loudly in all directions.
Looking up, we scan the treetops. The song continues.
We search and search. Suddenly, the brilliance
of a passing cloud reveals a bright blue bird. He's been buried in the blue
sky, high up in a pine. An indigo bunting. We stay
silent. We watch him like a flag, with our hands on our hearts.
We are pledging our allegiance. We listen for a long time. As long as it takes.
Until he finishes singing and flies away. That's when we finally know
to look down again.

Flagstaff, Arizona

A rainbow over the lake. An owl pellet on a picnic table
in the pinewood. We dissect it. We use sticks as scalpels.

There are small bones within. A shrew's jaw. A tiny hind or forelimb.
We come to some silent agreement and wander separately,
collecting feathers. We have witnessed nothing
yet we can see it all.

Cardiff, Wales

This I've learned; nothing can be known. No. Not really known.
This much is obvious; we must learn to stop
seeking to know. We must learn instead only to watch
all things as we watch the peregrine
circling the clocktower. Look
as it rises into the sky. Look
as it climbs.
And climbs.
And climbs.
And climbs.

HOLY LAND

wildland, holy

land. let's go fishing
in the trout-stream, over-lea,
which is, you know, ice-melt

streaming out

from sloped mountainside,
down-land, days ago,
and which is full of

trout in the right season. trout

which move
like oil slicks between
storms as the breathing stream

shudders with ribs of day's

grey grace. full of reflection,
motes and blinking light,
hiding fish

under bright streaks.

in winter the sky is as white
and wide as a frozen lake, all day long.
our feet are cold

all day long but when we catch those

slender, slick bodies,
when we cook them up, out there, our bellies
will be full and we will be so

deep in that wild

land, at last resting with the holy
firelight landing on our eye-
lids as the daylight
goes out.

DISPOSSESSION

In the gauzy dawn a thrush lay
on the wooden porch
 unmoving mystery
 before the window, grey
 morning, like snow, settled on its orange and black
 mantle, bright blood
 pooled in the line of its beak,
 winter's bones scattered around.

Some who fly the city also find
 a limit to the sky
 in the skyscraper's glass
 and go to death in an instance
 of unexpected resistance, ignorant
 to the sun's rising
 on the wrong horizon,
 and the city reflecting
 back upon itself.

Others enter like the flicker
 flown down the chimney,
 and, trapped,
 circle the room, cursing and
 ghoulish, in need
 of exorcising, dispossession, of our throwing
open
 the windows,
 the doors.

AT TINKINSWOOD

Two men followed me alone
into the distance of that remote Welsh field, at mid-day,
in the low-blue mist
of a dream or the underworld, toward
the megalith.

I imagined the faint outline of an ending.

The stones

stood
conducting their reticular path from past
to present, present to past, back to
present, back and back and back. They stood recounting
their indices, damp and lustrously recycled;
landscape with powerlines, nearly raining,
cattle grazing, nearby
transmission towers.

Passing

beyond
the chamber, as if going
to vanish among the trees, I sat instead
within a round of flat stones
and considered the myth of women

obliterated because they had danced
in sacred summer with the fragrance of honeysuckle
sweetening the air, in the ecstasy of openness, forgetting
the Sabbath.

(... thus punished, were they missed by their lovers,
brothers, fathers? Did their men

visit to mourn what remained of their forms
in the glacial fate of stone?)

Blue mists gathered into grey rain. The men who
followed sheltered in the burial chamber,
settled in, popped the tabs of the beer they'd brought,
and began to speak in quiet voices.

I wanted to be there
alone. I waited
in the rain for my chance. I was already privately
tethering
to that recurrent past. I had conceded, had begun
the ritual,

had drawn out
the nine-hundred-twenty
mostly-broken human
bones and placed them
to whiten in the sun
throughout centuries, seasonally, returning
them back into the tomb. At last
I added my own and continued
to wait. It was

a millennia before fragments
of my curved pelvis and my feminine
femur were unearthed and identified.

Conclusion: a female body
Conclusion: in a ritual of profound respect and care, she
had been prepared

for the afterlife. And those wise men

of the future begin

to speculate

on the precise nature of my faith. They place a plaque

before the tomb with this warning:

It is believed

to spend a moonless night among the sacred stones on the eve

of the winter solstice will lead

to death or else

to a general madness. Or else

to a dreamer waking cold

and alone in the thrumming field, afflicted

with a lasting madness which is an enduring,

stone-heavy word under her tongue, which is

being struck stone-dumb for rejoicing, remaining, impatient

to be heard, while slowly weathering

across the huge sprawl of history.

MEADOWLARK

From the third maybe fourth floor, confused after
consecutive evenings of watching out various hotel windows
to get my bearings, in nightly new places, looking down into parking lots
or out at nothing but points of light traversing waning darkness, fireflies
stuck on, cruising along the highway at dawn, I saw movement
of another sort on the ground, and through my lens, looking closer, I made
out the yellow-as-a-lemon-rind throat and black breast-strap
of a meadowlark. I wanted to say its name aloud,
then repeat it many times. To shape it
in my mouth and shake it out,
for the sake of the sense I had as I spoke it, so close
to metal, a slow reel, stooping to bow, to kneel
down and come up sharp, leaping back among the bark, laughing,
the word endowed with power, now sewing itself into the mewling world
like a mending thread, a well of honey brewed to mead, like a single spark
drifting westward along the highway, as an oath is carried
on, a song delivered on a lilting tongue, or the soul
out searching the deepest ruts for something
small to swallow down.

SETTLEMENTS

... drove to the seaside, nodded
to the little alligators along the roadside,

thinking, what

is spared hardly knows
its own salvation.

All the turtles I've seen the insides of
on those long drives home, sometimes smoking
menthols, in the dusk.

The sky was greener than I could believe; clouds
congealing, the waves seeming to spew
forth, frothing all sorts of bitter, bubbling sicknesses; at my feet

the sprinkled cowl of a pink star-
fish washed up,
wasted, tugged
limply on my finger
tips, leaving traces
of salt, and began to melt.

Since O5 everyone on the coast watched the storms
with a perverse interest. They said this CAT2 might turn up, might
pull in against all odds and raise itself
again to a CAT4 or even 5.

The storms of the imagination never dwindle
or die out, never spend themselves or fall apart before
making landfall. They only ever grow

more fierce, more threatening, more capable of
destruction, more real.

For two days the shrimp shacks on the boardwalks
served special cocktails
named for the storm

then closed early
on the weekend with boards up over the windows.

Bottled water was emptied from the shop shelves.

The storm took charge of conversation. Some people said

I'm gonna ride it out. Some people would. Some drove

to the shore the day before landfall to assess the state
of things or to reckon with something big. Some, drawn
to catastrophe, approached the tide in eager

anticipation, wanting to dare the storm, to call its bluff.

Some believed they were special and thought the eyewall would arrive,
open up, and welcome them in.

Back then it was my job to mail checks

to people who were presumed victims

of exploitation and abuse

and had been

bullied and done wrong

by their too-big brand name bosses

or by the hospitals

where their babies were born

into poverty

or by the banks

which held the little money

they had.

We called them settlements, as in,
That's The End
Of That; Moving on; as in,
the place you will remain.

One settlement I sent
to an address in New Orleans
was returned with a handwritten letter:

Dear Sir, it said
my sister has been missing since Katrina.
I didn't yet declare her dead
but
I am her next of kin and I could really use
this money.

To be missing. Lost
in a storm,
for years. The mind extrapolates
unfathomable happenings
against the will. The imagination

expresses itself by passing
through the membranes
of the known world and reaching out

towards that tight blue line
below the low-slung belly of crawling clouds.

It knows that nothing,
oh nothing, truly disappears. There is an ongoing
reclamation. It makes

its way back
again, eyeing the exits, the shoulders,
winding
down the country roads, as the storm winds
begin to rise,
thinking, what
is presumed hardly knows
the weight of
the proof it's wanting.

LANDSCAPE WITH BATS

Along the Taff

at dusk, bats, birds, hills,

violet hooves, smooth stone

gradients, loaves set aside to rise, their full

weight

stress breath stress

evening easing

into night

upon the eye, seeing the lazy passage

of time, walk narrowed, slowed speech,

spectral haze, river's rapids, and passers-by

in landscape, dodging bats

in flight, in

visible light, stress

breath stress, these

unregistered

highs, they echo

locate.

GALVESTON REMEMBERED

Evelyn,

We cannot return to the coast. It is not as it was. But perhaps you will remember...

how the bayou crawled way up the back way one night
and brought gators up into your grandad's garden.

They rested there, by the pool, eating limes from the tops of semi-submerged citrus trees while you watched from within the lanai as if it was your private zoo, but in reverse. Beyond a doubt, the place was theirs.

You all packed up and moved to higher ground. It was summer and mosquitos the size of peaches were running black-market blood banks out of the undergrowth and causing big trouble all around.

You could only tell the buzzing bugs from your daddy flying drones at night because one shone a little white light and the others didn't. Those bloodsuckers made you all want to move again.

It was always summer then, and the ceiling fans only served to press the wet heat closer, like a stiff grip around your necks. That's when everyone was big on cooling down by drinking iced orange juice all day long. You all had orange juice fever, in a nostalgic way. It was simpler than water. People had a lot of bad associations with water.

The juice-fruit was being grown in and shipped from factories way up north and was said to have a *Good-Cool* northern flavour which you could really taste. Some said it made your blood too sweet for the insects' liking.

Well, the water kept on coming. By then your mama had the biggest bailing-bucket collection in the neighbourhood and she put it to good use. It became a matter of pride to keep your feet wet so people knew where you were from.

Anyway, you had gotten tired of moving inland. You wanted to make the most of your vanishing coast while you could and when you and your little brothers and sister finally got your own boat, that's just what you did.

One day you all went out and didn't come back for a good, long while. You caught a pelican with a fishing line and tied a note to its leg, hoping it would make its way inland. The note said that you'd found a nice place to stop and now lived out in the ocean like a school of marlins.

Never minding the water moccasins, you could swim right up to the top floor of some lower-lying establishments out there.

You'd all climb up on those roofs, singing and dancing, stomping your feet on the rafter. You played like you owned an island of your own, no rules and no one left to trouble you, just some eels and jellyfish at home below.

VIRGA

crushed ice evaporates in high desert, sage
and daisy-white, whiskey drunk ice-cold
by the river, it runs on

to the west bay, a mapped route
of captives, hummingbirds in the sweet cherry-red
gravity of the nectar feeder, the physics of
suspension, seeds flung

from stalks to germinate on rocks
where geckos brittle in the sun; belonging here
is being drawn in, assimilated, expelled,
and annihilated, in turn

westward, we move on, among blue corn,
the blue moon tracks, exposes a curvature, a body
aslant, the hunched back of the

southland west, cactus pups replicating,
many deaths, dried-up bird nests
high in blanched branches, the sun

keeps still while we revolve,
sleep with dogs
and through the night sweat
out all traces of what

has hung like a welt
of distant rainfall burning up
before ever reaching
the ground.

ARIZONA IN WINTER

I watched the children
run their races along the dirt tract. Burning off
energy before a long drive. Arizona in Winter.
Under-dressed. The land behind the hotel

being developed. Deep tire ruts in drying mud. I bent
to write my name in the damp Earth
with a stone at hand. I turned it
in my palm. Behold! a fossilized fern. Look! I laughed
and the kids came

running. Some million years old,
I told them. You look cold, I said. Squinted
across the landscape, the drawn eyes of the freeway
watching us, the Gods
of the crouching mountains. Some faces

in the windows on the fourth floor gazing out
at the weather, the image of the world giving
nothing away, a neat little kestrel perched on a light post,
looking around. A little kindling catching,

like a breath circulating through a body, a memory,
or its source. I was getting the distinct impression
on that morning, of something
happening.

CRITICAL ESSAY

Contents

INTRODUCTION	92
AREAS OF RESEARCH	94
INITIAL CONCERNS	94
ENVIRONMENTAL GRIEF AND AFFECT THEORY	97
ECOPOETRY, ECOCRITICISM, AND ECOPOETICS	101
<i>Exemplifying Ecopoetry</i>	101
<i>Nature Poetry and the Ecocritical View</i>	107
<i>Ecopoetics</i>	112
<i>MARY OLIVER</i>	115
<i>ARTHUR SZE</i>	117
<i>JOHN KINSELLA</i>	118
<i>JOHN BURNSIDE</i>	119
<i>JORIE GRAHAM</i>	121
CHAOS, COMPLEXITY, AND ASSEMBLAGE THEORY	123
THE TROUBLE: ANTHROPOCENE DISCOURSES AND MEDIATED NATURE	125
PROCESS AND METHODS	132
TECHNIQUES TOWARDS ECOPOETICS AND ANTHROPOCENE AFFECT	132
<i>Poetic Image, Sensuality, and Ways of Seeing</i>	133
<i>Accretion and Accumulation</i>	137
<i>Musicality, Sound, and Cadence</i>	139
<i>Shifting Tones, Voices, and Perspectives</i>	141
<i>Line, Space, Form, and Length</i>	142
<i>Conclusions and Poem Endings</i>	144
EMBODYING ECOLOGY: CONCEPTS AND THEMES	146
<i>The Concept of Ecology and Self-Organisation</i>	146
<i>Part 1: Childhood, Myth, and Imagination</i>	151
<i>Part 2: Mediation and Information</i>	154
<i>Part 3: Experience and Engagement</i>	157
<i>Thematic and Structural Impacts of the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020</i>	161
CHAOS AND THE PROCESS OF ASSEMBLAGE	163

<i>Emergence and Patterning</i>	163
<i>Energy</i>	165
<i>Composition/Recompositing</i>	166
CONCLUSION	169

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2018 I became, somewhat to my own surprise, a full-fledged birder. The realization struck me during a trip to New Mexico when I found myself standing outside of an Audubon bird sanctuary in Santa Fe with a field guide to the birds of the American Southwest and a pair of binoculars in hand. I was nearly giddy with excitement. My mind was swimming with the possibility of grosbeaks and tanagers, numerous difficult-to-identify hummingbirds, the prospect of owl pellets and raptor feathers, unfamiliar calls and songs rising out of scrub and shadow, flashes of unexpected colour. Standing in the parking lot, my eyes were already actively scanning the trees. My ears were already searching through the sounds around me for signs of life. I was fully “switched-on.” I now recognize this intense immersion as a form of attentive inhabitation which I had experienced, to different degrees, since childhood. It first took the shape of a vague animism which ruled my youthful imagination and led me to believe all animals and plants (as well as stones, storms, landforms, etc.) were important and powerful spiritual entities—emissaries from an ancient world of lore and forgotten magic. A more recent experience had recast my instinctive reverence and curiosity as a serious and mature veneration of the more-than-human world. It was a seemingly mundane encounter I had shortly after moving from a suburb of Seattle, Washington to Cardiff, Wales.

While entering a city park one mild autumn morning, I caught sight, for the first time, of a Eurasian jay foraging under a rosebush. I was instantly wonderstruck and stood captivated, arrested by the large, buff-coloured bird with a black mustache like a wry smile, and wings trimmed with a slender line of brilliant jewel-blue and black barred feathers. The sense that I had stumbled upon something extraordinary startled me. I did not know what to make of it. I looked around and was bemused by the apparent disinterest of other passersby. It was clear that this bird which so totally enthralled me was not rare or exotic or perhaps even very interesting by British standards. I was aware of how ridiculous and excessive my wonder must have seemed, yet it was genuine. My reeling mind sought to understand the unexpected force of this encounter and the power of this apparently commonplace experience. The jay was familiar to me, yet undeniably new. My imagination pursued invisible boundaries: Western

landscapes where the common Eurasian jay ceased to be; maps and histories of migrations; the distinctions and similarities in form, colouration, and behavior between the ordinary American blue jay and the Eurasian jay; how many cousin jays might exist in other parts of the world; elements added and removed through the impossibly slow process of evolution; the deep time through which evolution works; drifting continents; immense oceans dividing the world, separating kinds of beings; immense oceans being crossed; waves and winds transporting massive ships many generations distant; seeds buried in ship ballast; storms carrying other germs; human beings traversing vast territories, imagining new worlds; migratory birds sharing or paralleling flightpaths with airplanes, insects, and grains of pollen; lineages defined by obsolescence and introductions; all these things bearing enormous implications.

My unfamiliarity with Britain and its wildlife had allowed me to encounter a common British bird as a novelty and to experience a profound sense of wonder I had rarely felt since childhood. Suddenly, I was acutely conscious of the very many birds of America which I had lived among yet had never noticed or else had failed to appreciate. To think that the American robin, with whom I had shared my childhood in the Midwest, could be looked upon with surprise and awe, as exotic! This realization made me feel suddenly estranged from my sense of home. How little I truly knew of where I was from. How much I had taken for granted. I was ashamed of my ignorance and neglectfulness. And significantly, I was suddenly deeply aware of the way the creaturely world could reflect something of myself back at me; could, in an instant, capture my imagination and create momentous waves in my perception and my sense of being, could put me in my place or expel me from it.

That moment marked a transformation and a return; a shift from passively coexisting to actively engaging with environments and cohabitants with the openness, reverence, and eagerness of childhood. From that morning I began to look for birds. Then I began to notice beetles, slugs, spiders, and bees with a similar interest. I became aware of and attuned to plants sprouting along my regular walks. I watched them blossom and observed the changes, day by day, week by week. I began to learn different names by which to call them and became interested and involved in their slow and often obscure stories. In a mossy rose gall I discovered the fantastic: mutation and creation, parasitic horror, and uncanny beauty. I was astounded by the intricacies of lichens and the mystique of slime molds.

Environmental attentiveness encourages an embodied sense of participation and involvement in the world. It is a creative and experimental form of being situated. Something reveals itself in these kinds of encounters, which is beyond beauty and beyond spectacular strangeness. It is partially an impression of ecology, a sense of the dense and fluid mesh of relationship, influence and implication. The consequence of engaging with the world this way is the parallel and exponential growth of both mystery and understanding.

When I reflect on where my project began, I conclude it began in autumn, in a city park, in a foreign country, with an ordinary bird under a rosebush. It began with an awakening to what is and always has been the matter of the world; a source of numinous wonder and profound wisdom which is revealed through attentiveness and a willingness to remain open to the multivalent possibilities it presents.

AREAS OF RESEARCH

Initial Concerns

Discovering a form of deep and devoted engagement with the environment in my adult life has been a profound experience. It has had a great spiritual and philosophical impact. My desire to express a sense of wonder at a complex, intertwined world of habitats and inhabitants was the original inspiration for my poetry collection. I sought to write poems that conveyed intensely affective encounters with wildlife as Emily Dickinson (1865) did so memorably when she wrote of a snake eliciting a “zero at the bone” (p. 460) or Elizabeth Bishop (1976) did when she encountered a moose during a bus ride in the night and wondered, “Why, why do we feel/ (we all feel) this sweet/ sensation of joy?” (p. 30).

These poems spoke to my own observations, experiences, and imaginings. They slipped beyond the immediate experience to explore what the natural world *does*, both in the physical world and within the human mind and heart. The poetry of Mary Oliver had a formative influence on my initial ideas about how to write of my encounters with the natural world openly and with reverence.

In the beginning, I believed I would write nature poetry. Yet, as I began to write about what I experienced when I observed the natural world with poetic intent, I consistently

found my attention hijacked by the disruptive energy of human activity. I could immerse myself in watching and admiring the slow work of a spider weaving a web without abstracting the experience with deeper meanings, however, when I began to interrogate the experience and to write about what I saw, I found something else consistently breaking in and diverting my attention. In the greater poetic context, noxious noise, synthetic scents, and the many varieties of human materiality and meaning pervaded. These interruptions harassed me and upset the original course of my work. Juliana Spahr (2011) is often quoted as noting that nature poetry tends, “to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side destroying the bird’s habitat” (p. 69). I was incapable of ignoring the bulldozer, thus found myself writing something quite different from nature poetry.

The impossibility of writing honestly, to any depth about wildlife or the environment without acknowledging the ubiquitous mark of humanity complicated the purpose of my collection. My attempts to fit the human presence into the environmental picture, to understand its place in the intricate enmeshment of beings, led me to deeply distressing facts about mass extinctions, the wholesale destruction of fragile habitats, and the causes (and complex consequences) of human-driven ecological devastation. I wanted to understand environmental destruction and what it means to be ecologically enmeshed and while Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) provided a foundation for my understanding of the literature of the early environmental movement, Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) demonstrated ecological wisdom and affective engagement.

In this early stage of researching for my collection, the sense of wonder I hoped to convey in my poetry became eclipsed by grief, anxiety, and resentment. I saw only a world in peril. I read John Keats and John Clare with a pitiful sense of envy. I became familiar with the concept of the *Anthropocene*, a term coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stroemer in 2000 to describe a period of geological history defined and dominated by human activity.¹ My vision of the natural world became coloured by melancholy and despair. The more aware I became of the current state of the

¹ In 2000, atmospheric scientists Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stroemer provocatively wrote, “Considering...still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term “Anthropocene” for the current geological epoch” (p. 17).

environment and the environmental crisis, the more doomed and horrified I felt and the more painful my sense of irreparable loss became. I was paralyzed by the doubt that poetry could have any real relevance in a world careening towards ecological collapse, despite the willingness of some optimistic critics to contemplate poetry's potential to "save the Earth."²

The environmental crisis, as Theodore Roszak (2001) described it:

... is a story without a center, a formless flurry of incidents and events. There are endless accounts of disasters, menace, impending doom: but the scattered reports come at us like gunshots fired by a sniper in the night. Our life is at stake, but the danger seems accidental, a stroke of bad luck. There are facts and figures about the threat, more than most of us can take in. At a certain point we may even grow numb and turn off in confusion or resignation. (p. 308)

To move beyond my creative resignation and to make sense of what I was experiencing, I began to focus on several areas of research. The first subject of enquiry was the nature of environmental grief and the affective experience of environmental enmeshment in ecological crisis. The second was the history and characteristics of ecopoetry and the poetics of ecological awareness. I also began to research the science and philosophies of ecology and theories of chaotic and complex systems. My final topic of research is the discourse of the Anthropocene, which crystalized as a central theme in my work and represents a point at which all other topics coalesced.

Of course, these themes are not isolated from one another. They interact and crosspollinate. My research did not follow a linear path from one idea to the next, but rather grew in multiple directions at once. It was dendritic, proceeding ahead and splitting, some ideas looping back and threading through others, weaving concepts into one another. The connections between ideas are fluid and there is constant flow of communication. There are many topics which I encountered during my research which opened entirely new avenues and possibilities, many of which I only partially explored before turning back. Choosing which subjects to pursue and to take onboard in the writing of my poetry collection was a significant part of my process. Among the concepts of which my research barely scratched the surface but which I believe have

² Planetary salvation through poetry is a prospect entertained in John Felstiner's *Can Poetry Save the Earth: A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (2009) as well as more recently in the introductions and prefaces to *Ecopoetry Anthology* (Fisher-Wirth & Street, 2011) and *Here: Poems for the Planet* (Coleman, 2009). Also, Bate (2001) who asserted "...poetry is the place where we save the earth" (p. 283).

great relevance and potential in discussions of ecopoetics and the Anthropocene are ecofeminism, deep ecology, thing theory, cybernetics, and intertextuality. Posthumanism was also a path of enquiry from which I forced myself to turn. Tracing connections and linking systems is like gazing too long into J. L. Borges' *Aleph*.³ Imposing limits on my research topics was essential to keep a sense of cohesiveness and direction in my work. For the sake of organization, I will discuss the key research topics which influenced my poetics under several general headings, while acknowledging the tendency of these ideas to bleed and blur borders.

Environmental Grief and Affect Theory

The first effort I made in addressing my incapacitating despair over ecological crisis was to directly explore grief and melancholy related to environmental issues. Renee Lertzman's fascinating study, *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement* (2015) provided a source of both insight and inspiration. Lertzman's work explores the experiences and reflections of a group of individuals living in Green Bay, Wisconsin, who she suggests are suffering from *environmental melancholia*, a phenomenon in which one becomes "'frozen' or otherwise arrested due to a lack of acknowledgement of what has been lost" (p. 6). These losses include clean water and air, natural areas free from pollution (waste, light, sound), and the sense of peace associated with access to natural spaces. Charles Shepherdson (2007) explains Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, noting,

in the case of the melancholic, the loss of this [beloved] object is intolerable, and the object, instead of being altogether lost, is maintained within the subject, entombed within the ego itself where it continues to live, with a life that brings suffering to the subject. (pp. 57-58)

³ In Borges' short story of the same name the aleph is, "a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance" in which, "Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things" seen "from every angle of the universe." The narrator continues, "I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the centre of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London)...; I saw in a backyard of Soler Street the same tiles that thirty years before I'd seen in the entrance of a house in Fray Bentos; I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand." (Borges, 1971, pp. 13-14). David Farrier (2019) also likens ecological thinking in the Anthropocene, "across multiple scales", with Borges' concept of the Aleph (p. 21).

Shepherdson goes on to insist that “this paralyzing force” in melancholia is what we sometimes call “guilt” or “self-hatred” (p. 64), which is significant when we consider that many of the losses attributed to the ecological crisis are not naturally occurring phenomenon, but consequences of human activity. Arguably, the destruction of ecosystems towards the potential extinction of our own species is an expression of self-hatred and a recognition of our culpability in the obliteration of innumerable lifeforms, lifeways, and livable habitats would almost certainly be a source of guilt.

Psychological aspects of the environmental crisis are complex and diverse and can be linked to a range of behaviors, as Joseph Dodd demonstrates so clearly. Anxiety, and specifically an ‘anxiety-defense’ can lead to inactivity in the face of the real threat of ecological collapse (Dodd, 2011, p. 5). Roszak (2001) suggests that more and more often “what people bring before doctors and therapists for treatment—agonies of body and spirit—are symptoms of the biospheric emergency registering at the most intimate level of life” (p. 308). The environmental crisis, in Roszak’s opinion, is the symptom of a kind of “collusive madness” (p. 311).

What particularly interested me in Lertzman’s (2015) research was her focus on “loss in the context of nature and... how memories and associations of nature and childhood often appear interwoven and inseparable” (p. 75). To elaborate on that point, Lertzman continues,

A paradoxical feature of these types of recollection is that they are less childhood memories than they are memories *about childhood*... Important facts are not retained; instead, their psychic significance is displaced onto closely associated but less important details, e.g. the blue sky or the sand under bare feet... the objective is not to reduce environmental objects to ‘mere’ constructions or fantasy, but rather to appreciate how these relations are often inseparable with imbricated psychic and social meanings. (pp. 77-78)

Lertzman presents a complex psychological process in which the environment has significant symbolic weight and often plays a large part in conceptualizing our early selves, our perceptions of goodness and safety, and our belief in nature comprising, “sites of innocence prior to the ‘fall’ of adult knowledge and awareness” (p. 78).

I recognized a great deal of poetic potential in this imbrication of the environment and identity, the symbolic narratives of self and childhood, and the idea that gaining knowledge means losing something arguably more precious. Because many of my own most lucid childhood memories take place outdoors in woodlands or farmland, or

involve more-than-human entities, childhood became a key element in my exploration of humanity's fraught relationship with the biosphere. Childhood is both a source of personal narrative and an affective symbol.

The intense emotions associated with an awareness and experience of environmental crisis led me to question how my poetry could engage with these affective aspects. How might addressing my own anxiety-defense through my poetry put an end to my creative inertia? How might an affective approach be used to express the circumstance of our time or set in motion a therapeutic reckoning? In their excellent introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, editors Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010) define affect in stirring, appropriately affective terms as,

an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well* as the passage (and the duration of passages) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (p. 1)

In his notes on the translation of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi defines affect as not denoting a personal feeling or sentiment but rather, “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003, p. xvi).

There is a link here between this formulation of affect and theories of chaos and assemblage, which create a bridge to ecological thinking, as I will discuss in the sections below. In particular, the insistence on intensities and resonances encouraged me to identify generative affective techniques in poetry about nature and the environment, to recognize when a poem had stimulated the passage of such intensities, and when I felt myself affected.

In contemporary life, anxiety appears to be one of the most pervasive affects. Jess Cotton notes the relationship between climate change, enormous amounts of information, and paralyzing environmental affect. She observes:

Anxiety, and its cousin defenses, disaffection and disillusionment, are contagious affects, though their contagion has largely dissociating and disorienting effects, which might account for the strange conundrum before us:

that the more that we know about climate change, the worse the situation becomes. (Cotton, 2020, p. 4)

Cotton uses the work of John Ashbery as an example of how this very modern sense of anxiety can be expressed in poetry. She claims, “anxiety has a distinctive temporality: it looks both backwards and forwards,” noting that the effect of Ashbery’s poetry “is never quite nostalgia, but rather an ironic sense of our relation to history” (p. 11).

Another insightful discussion of anxieties related to environmental crisis comes from Nicole Merola (2018) who explores the poetics of Julian Spahr. She suggests that through “formal and syntactic tactics” Spahr “engages a range of Anthropocene affects—including very circumscribed forms of interpersonal hope, dis-ease, distraction, irritation, grief, anger, rage, and ‘west melancholy’” (p. 31). Spahr’s formal experiments “help us practice forms of Anthropocene inhabitation” which “operate as critical coping mechanisms that register how we conceptualize and live in the Anthropocene, its effects, and its affects” (p. 43).

In her introduction to *Ordinary Affects* Kathleen Stewart (2007) examines the writing of complex affect. She describes her own text as, “an assemblage of scenes that pull the course of the book into a tangle of trajectories, connections, and disjunctions” (p. 5). The concept of the assemblage, which I will discuss in more depth later, appears here as a force for affective engagement. Stewart does not write “as a trusted guide” but as “a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter” (p. 5) Becoming a ‘point of impact’ also implies humility and the abandonment of ego, which encourages authentic affective engagement with our unpredictable world.

Stewart’s words are luminous and enthralling when she explains,

From the perspective of ordinary affects, things like narrative and identity become tentative through forceful compositions of disparate and moving elements: the watching and waiting for an event to unfold, the details of scenes, the strange or predictable progression in which one thing leads to another, the still life that gives pause, the resonance that lingers, the lines along which signs rush and form relays, the layering of immanent experience, the dreams of rest or redemption or revenge... they gather themselves in what we think of as stories and selves. But they can also remain, or become again, dispersed, floating, recombining. (p. 6)

Dynamic movement and the circulation of energy are crucial to the idea of affect. They are also relevant to the characterization of ecological systems. The concepts of affect and the fluctuation and circulation of energy which define it provided an important inspiration for my work. I strove to become a ‘point of impact’ by allowing my intuition to be drawn towards or moved from various affective intensities. I attempted to channel the energies I encountered and locate them in my memory and imagination. Affect became a method of expressing the anxieties of ecological collapse as well as a useful metaphor for dynamic ecosystems.

Ecopoetry, Ecocriticism, and Eco poetics

EXEMPLIFYING ECOPOETRY

Concurrent with my research of environmental grief, I began to read and study traditional nature poetry alongside contemporary environmental and ecological poetry. I was interested in understanding how poetry has historically responded to shifts in perception of nature and the environment.

There is undoubtedly a distinction between traditional nature poetry and poetry written in direct response to environmental issues, although that distinction remains a point of contention. The term ecopoetry arose as a means of acknowledging the modern turn in poetry that engages with environmental or ecological topics. The prefix eco refers to *ecology*, the complex science concerned with “the study of all forms of life over the expanse of time that life has existed on earth, and all the environmental relationships in which life is present” (Keller & Golley, 2000, p. 9). Non-living entities also insinuate themselves in this study of lifeforms and play a crucial role in ecosystems. The concept of ecology has also been adopted by the humanities and applied to philosophy, economics, politics, culture, etc. Ecology, in this sense, can be more broadly conceived as the study of complex and dynamic relationships between lifeforms, cultures, ideas, etc.

In order to better understand the relationship between nature, environment, ecology, and poetry, I read anthologies of nature poetry, environmental poetry, and ecopoetry. I sought thematic or formal similarities which might reveal the underlying qualities and characteristics that define ecopoetry as distinct from nature poetry.

Some anthologies focusing on topics of the environment or non-human lifeforms only vaguely attempt to associate the poems with a particular genre. For instance, in the introduction to *The Thunder Mutters* Alice Oswald (2005) claims

No prospects, pastorals or nostalgic poems are in here... 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. (p. x)

Instead, she “favored restless poems”, poetry which is “accretive rather than syntactic”, and poetry without a particular ecological message but which puts “our inner world in contact with the outer world” (p. x). Generally, the poems here are about seasons and landscapes, encounters with birds or musings on fish, moss, and weather. Many are anonymous. Ian Hamilton Finlay’s poem ‘Estuary’ stands out in the anthology, both in form and because it alludes to environmental issues. The poem is comprised of two rows of five words which are evocative of a coastal environment, including the names of plants and seabirds. A final third row lists the names of five oil companies “ESSO MOBIL BP EXXON SHELL” (2005, p. 72). ‘Estuary’ represents something different from traditional nature poetry. Its minimal language is not descriptive, yet its form and simplicity of expression are suggestive of a relationship which is so unquestionable that no finer details are necessary.

In *Earth Songs: A resurgence anthology of contemporary eco-poetry*, Peter Abbs (2002) has collected poems which “are moving celebrations: affirmations of the elements, of the outer and inner structures of the material world, of wildlife, of the seasons, of landscape, of wilderness, of the primordial” (p. 15). Abbs’ anthology is split into thematic sections which define the tones and themes of the poems therein. The majority of section titles suggest a warm, interrogative poetry such as, ‘Naming Gaia’, ‘The Ecology of Love’ and ‘The Search for Enlightenment’. The section titled our ‘Our Sick Planet’ stands out as the most conscious and critical of environmental destruction and ecological disaster. This section includes Richard Poole’s (2002) moving poetic expression of concern for the loss of native species in Great Britain, ‘The Objective Naturalist’. It also includes Gary Snyder’s polemic ‘Front Lines’ in which Snyder graphically depicts logging in America with images of mindless and reckless destruction:

A bulldozer grinding and slobbering
Sideslipping and belching on top of
The skinned-up bodies of still-live bushes
In the pay of a man
From town.

(Snyder, 2002, p. 48)

Earth Songs includes five poems from Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*, a collection of poems described by the book's publisher as ranging "from the lucid, lyrical, almost mystical to the mytho-biotic" (New Directions Publishing, n.d.). Snyder's poetry is frequently found in anthologies of environmental poetry and ecopoetry. His themes are often critical of the misuse and overexploitation of land while also insisting on practices of dwelling inspired by Native American tradition and Zen Buddhism. Snyder's preeminence and reputation as an ecopoet has led to him being frequently referred to as the "laureate of Deep Ecology" (Al Jumaili, 2014, p. 62).

Other anthologies attempt to explicitly identify the distinct genre into which these ecologically inspired poems fall. Neil Astley's introduction to *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems* (2007) gives this definition:

Ecopoetry goes beyond traditional nature poetry to take on distinctly contemporary issues, recognizing the interdependence of all life on earth, the wildness and otherness of nature, and the irresponsibility of our attempts to tame and plunder nature. Ecopoems dramatize the dangers and poverty of a modern world perilously cut off from nature and ruled by technology, self-interest, and economic power. (p. 15)

As the above description suggests, *Earth Shattering* anthologizes poems which express, to some degree, the fraught relationship between humanity and the environment. It includes several poems by Robert Hass, who has helped define the genre of ecopoetry in recent decades. Hass's poem 'State of the Planet' appears in *Earth Shattering*. It is an example of an ecopoem which is explicit in its concerns about climate change, about environmental degradation, and about the survival of our species. It also muses over "This voice trying to speak across centuries" and the idea that "Poetry should be able to comprehend the earth, To set aside from time to time its natural idioms/ Of ardor and revulsion, and say.../ Something of the earth beyond our human dramas." (Hass, 2007, p. 210).

The narrator also implicates himself in the state of the planet, admitting "Emissions from millions of cars, idling like mine" (p. 210) are contributing to climate change and

again later, “gouts of the oil that burns inside/The engine of the car I’m driving oozes from the banks” (p. 211). Hass is particularly effective in weaving the threads across time and space and drawing together a picture of a complex world in deep crisis. His is an eco-poetics in which the complexity of our relationship with the planet is explored through many frames.

In *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (2011), Harriet Tarlo suggests a distinction between what she terms radical landscape poetry and eco-poetry. Although some of the poems in the anthology are eco-poetical works, she stresses that the landscape poet goes out into the natural world, is present and engaged with it. Tarlo’s discussion of landscape echoes John Wylie’s fascinating phenomenological exploration of landscape and his proposal that landscape is “defined in terms of embodied practices of dwelling—practices of being-in-the-world in which self and landscape are entwined and emergent” (Wylie, 2007, p. 14). Tarlo finds what Wylie refers to as “*practices* of landscaping”⁴ to be crucial to a radical landscape poetry which experiences nature through dwelling and being both the product and producer of landscape.

Laura-Gray Street engages with a different characteristic of eco-poetry in her introduction to *The Eco-poetry Anthology* (Fisher-Wirth & Street, 2013). She claims that “poetry has always been eco-poetry, in that the origins of poetry are embedded in the natural world,” but that contemporary eco-poetry is

... the apprehension of real biological selves (as opposed to fantasy selves) inhabiting this planet along with us, a mix of negative capability and empathy expressed with the cadence, imagery, and wit to make it visceral, so that it lodges in our neural systems and cultivates the environmental imagination that is analogue to the crucial biodiversity of the rainforests and our intestines. (p. xxxviii)

Unlike *The Eco-poetry Anthology* and *Earth Shattering*, which include historic poems in their collections of eco-poetry and eco-poetics, the desire to distance contemporary nature poetry from the traditions of the Western Romantic pastoral is evident in several other anthologies. For example, most of the poems in *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology* (2018) were written in and around the new millennium, with the

⁴ Wylie includes “everyday things like walking, looking, gardening, driving, building” in his *practices* of landscaping and suggests they are the origin of our ideas of nature and culture. (Wylie, 2007, p. 11)

exception of a few from the 1930s. With its focus on eco-justice, the poems in this collection represent “thematic intersections of social justice, environment and culture” (Cardenas & Tuckey, 2018, p. 9). Editor Melissa Tuckey highlights the importance of acknowledging the environmental crisis as inextricably bound to issues of race, war, colonization, and “other forms of dispossession” which have “robbed generations from their connection to the land” (p. 2). Though these issues have historic roots, this anthology chooses to focus on primarily contemporary expressions of their lasting impacts.

In the introduction to *Black Nature* (2009), Camille T. Dungy is also critical of the Romantic tradition, the pastoral, and the “nature poem in the Western intellectual canon” (p. xxi). She notes that, while privileged classes saw nature as a refuge and wilderness as a romance into which they could escape from an increasingly industrialized world, the environment had a very different meaning to African slaves. For African Americans, the environment is “steeped in a legacy of violence, forced labor, torture and death” (2009, p. xxi). While members of the ruling class might have ‘escaped’ to the countryside for peace and wellbeing, escape into wilderness was literal escape and a matter of life and death for those who were enslaved.

June Jordan’s ‘Out in the Country of My Country’ is an excellent example of how environments are storied and haunted. In the poem the narrator hikes through mountainous environments and woodland in winter, encountering different species of tree, birdsong, mica glittering along a road, and so on. Towards the end of the poem, she suddenly encounters herself “Chasing my face among displacement of a stream”. The poem’s context shifts with this encounter and the experience of the environment becomes transporative. “I behold the Indian: I become the slave/again I am hunting/ I am hunted in these snowy woods” she writes (Jordan, 2009, p. 265). Dungy’s point is one of the most convincing for an ecopoetics that resists Romanticization and instead acknowledges urban environments and minority perspectives to “explore sources of connection to, but also alienation from, the land” (2009, p. xxiii).

The idea that poetry about nature is potentially a valuable tool for political or social change is expressed in *Here: Poems for the Planet* (Coleman, 2019). The explicit aim of this collection is, “to galvanize readers to address the environmental crisis head on, with enthusiasm and without the paralyzing fear that leads to indifference and

inaction” (2019, p. xvi). What makes *Here* even more interesting is that the final section of the collection is not poetry, but an activist guide written by the Union of Concerned Scientists which, “details some of the steps you can take by yourself, in community, and in communication with the institutional powers that be” (p. xvii). In *Here* the poetry is a kind of preface for a more active environmentalism which includes engaging with politicians, organizing and attending protests and boycotts, writing letters to the editor, and using social media to campaign for or against issues.

Environmental activism and protest are essential to the poetry of Brenda Hillman. In her poem ‘The Seeds Talk Back to Monsanto’ Hillman’s seeds are activists and “eco-terrorist[s]”, resisting the genetic engineering technologies that are “turning farmers into serfs”. The seeds “talk back to Monsanto. They talk back to AstraZeneca & Novartis”. They *sit* in protest, “like Thoreau/in a *Don’t sprout for Monsanto*” (Hillman, 2019, p. 163). Hillman’s poem moves between whimsy, dismay, and political anger. Many of the poems in her collection *Practical Water* (2009) deal with political bodies, committees, Congress, etc. There are examples throughout of a documentary poetics which she calls “reportorial poetics.” She gives an example of the process of this poetics: “working with trance while sitting in Congressional hearings i recorded details into a notebook” (p. 33).

Perhaps one of the most impactful poetic works I read during my research of ecopoetry was Muriel Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead*. This remarkable long poem documents the Hawk’s Nest tunnel tragedy in which hundreds of migrant workers (many of whom were African American) died of acute silicosis, a disease caused by breathing in crystalline silica dust during mining works, between 1930-1932. In Leonard Scigaj’s (2005) words, Rukeyser “transforms a historical narrative of a Union Carbide worker tragedy into an ecological vision that critiques corporate greed and America’s manifest destiny myth” (p. 1). Stacy Alaimo (2010) suggests that “the poem does not reinstate a harmonious nature, but instead portrays hazardous industrial environments that extend across the landscape” (p. 47). What makes Rukeyser’s radically experimental poem so profoundly engaging and relevant in the discussion of ecopoetry is that it combines a range of scientific, poetic, and ordinary language to produce a narrative of implication and entanglement, shifting and weaving between numerous distinct voices, allowing a larger picture to emerge out of the varied images. Alaimo (2010) remarks that in addition to her striking poetic descriptions, Rukeyser drew “heavily from the

actual congressional hearings but also includes other reportage, letters, a clip from Union Carbide's stock report, a scientific equation for the energy of falling water, and the symbol for silica, SiO₂" (p. 46).

Rukeyser paints an intensely affective portrait of the Hawk's Nest disaster and in the end leaves the reader with an "altered landscape" which, "offers irrefutable evidence of disrupted ecosystems in the piles of silica, the dammed water, and the hasty cornfield graves of workers who met an early death" (Scigaj, 2005, p. 132).

When poems about nature begin to interrogate social justice, technology, urban spaces, economic systems, histories of oppression, and practices of consumption the usefulness of the tricky notion of nature, with its associated birds, beasts, flowers, and pristine wildernesses, is in question. Scott Knickerbocker (2012) asserts,

That all aesthetic experience occurs within nature, in the broadest sense of the term. Indeed, there could be no poem (or any other human creation, from microchips to civilizations) without the physical, nonhuman world that precedes, exceeds, and environs it. (pp. 7-8)

This idea expands the realms of nature and disturbs notions of what a poem inspired by nature can be about. Thinking of *ecology* rather than *nature* is a more appropriate mode of engaging with a complex world without binaries and hard boundaries. Through ecology, the world is conceived as a constant flow of energies in a vast system of permeable entities across many scales and degrees. It is all inclusive.

The thematic content, form, and structure of ecopoetry is incredibly diverse and defies ideas of traditional nature poetry. Exploring ecocriticism was useful in contextualizing the historic shifts away from nature poetry towards ecopoetry and the emergence of ecopoetic experimentations.

NATURE POETRY AND THE ECOCRITICAL VIEW

In 2002, when J. Scott Bryson suggested the novel genre of ecopoetry he was acknowledging a divergence in contemporary 'nature poetry' which had turned it away from the traditions of Romanticism. He offered a set of distinguishing characteristics: "ecocentrism, a humble appreciation of wildness, and a skepticism toward hyperrationality and its overreliance on technology" (2002, p. 7). Three years

later, he ventured a more refined definition of ecopoetry and attempted to summarize and condense the overall characterization⁵ of this new genre of poetry as

...a mode that, while adhering to certain conventions of traditional nature poetry, advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues, thus becoming generally marked by three primary characteristics: an ecological and biocentric perspective recognizing the interdependent nature of the world; a deep humility with regard to our relationships with human and nonhuman nature; and an intense skepticism toward hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to condemnation of an over technologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe. (Bryson, 2005, p. 2)

What complicates matters is Bryson's suggestion that ecopoets write, "from an ecological perspective" and are "environmentally conscious." Many traditional Romantic poets meet this criteria. This point has been argued by numerous scholars, perhaps most prominently, Jonathan Bate in *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991).

Bate refutes early ecocritical suggestions that Wordsworth and the Romantics in general were not ecologically sensitive poets because they saw nature as a means through which the privileged imagination of men could transcend the baseness of the world. Through a 'green reading' of Wordsworth, however, Bate finds the poet had, "a respect for the earth and a scepticism as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be-all and end-all of human society" (1991, p. 9). In this view Wordsworth is a proto-ecopoet whose writing predates the concept of ecology yet reflects a sensitivity towards nature and its intrinsic worth.

Perhaps one of the most compelling examples of Romantic proto-ecopoetics is the poetry of John Clare. Clare's position as a peasant poet and farmer by profession, and his deep concern with land use,⁶ sets him apart from other Romantic poets whose vision of nature, though sympathetic, were arguably less practical or intimate than Clare's. Indeed, in 1922 John Middleton Murry (2000) wrote that John Clare was a

⁵ In his preface, Bryson (2005) provides an overview of other ecocritical attempts at defining "the new brand of nature poetry" which includes Terry Gifford's "green poetry", Scigaj's idea of poetry in which nature is "conceived as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclical feedback systems", Lawrence Buell's "environmentally-oriented works", Murphy's environmental literature of "political and ethical" advocacy, and Gilcrest's notion of "an ecocentric ethic of interconnectedness..." (p. 2)

⁶ John Clare was profoundly concerned with the parliamentary Enclosure Acts, which made large areas of common land, private and forced many rural labourers to leave the countryside to seek employment in towns and cities.

“true-nature poet” whose knowledge of “the ways of birds and beasts and flowers” was “intimate and self-forgetful” (p. 41). Murry suggested that Clare “hardly humanized them; he seems rather to have lived on the same level of existence as they” (pp. 42). This description is striking in its relevance to modern ecopoetic thinking which respects the agency of the more-than-human world and strives to put *eco* before *ego*.

Building on Bate’s work, Lisa Ottum and Seth Reno (2016) make a claim for a new view of “the emotion of Romantic environmentalism—to consider love of nature not as hopelessly naïve or escapist but as generative of ecological thinking” (p. 2). This argument proposes that appreciation of nature, even sanguine or sentimental appreciation, is the bedrock of ecological thinking.

Historic environmentalism and ecological thinking are highlighted in John Felstiner’s wonderfully inclusive, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?: A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (2009). Through his analysis of poems from a broad range of poets such as William Blake, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Ted Hughes, Denise Levertov, Derek Walcott and many others, Felstiner makes a compelling case for an historic ecological sensitivity in traditional and modern poetry about animals and environments.

The otherwise persuasive argument that, beyond the pastoral and pathetic fallacy, Romantic poetry often exhibited characteristics of ecopoetry disregards a key component of Bryson’s definition of ecopoetry: ecopoetry addresses *distinctly contemporary problems*. Distinctly contemporary of course means environmental issues such as large-scale industrial deforestation, the ubiquity of microplastics and toxic chemical pollutants, and changing global climactic systems due to a sprawling human civilization built upon pervasive petrochemical technologies. As John Barnie (1996) claims, “the Wordsworthian view that poetry and human nature cannot be meaningfully divorced from the rest of nature seems to me axiomatic. However, nature is not the same as it was in Wordsworth’s time” (p. 1).

Although Romantic poets often find a rightful place in contemporary anthologies of ecopoetry (particularly when they are included to contextualize the historic developments in environmental writing), many contemporary ecopoets or ecopoems

would not so easily fit into a collection of nature poetry.⁷ This is an important consideration and a key reason I began to consider my work as being more specifically ecopoetry of the Anthropocene—a term which clearly associated itself with an awareness of these contemporary problems. A clearer understanding of modern environmental issues rudely forces nature out of nature poetry in a way which was reflected in my own continual expulsion from sublime natural encounters at the beginning of my project.

In his discussion of ecopoetry, Leonard Scigaj (1999) writes of a resurgence in poetry that “addresses our connection to the natural world” beginning in the late 1960s (p. 7). He remarks that these poets “treat nature not as a convenient background for human concerns but acknowledge that it sustains human, as well as nonhuman life in ecosystems that have been deeply bruised by human exploitation and pollution” (p. 7). This reconceptualizes nature not as separate but as something in which human beings play an active and increasingly antagonistic part and for which they are responsible.

When Bill McKibben provocatively professed an ‘end of nature’ he was thinking about realms perceived to be untouched by human presence. He wrote, “We have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us—its separation from human society” (McKibben, 2006, p. 70). Nature has become a problematic notion because it proports binaries between human/non-human and culture/environment. How can we continue to conceive of human beings as existing outside of nature when modern science offers evidence that there are roughly as many bacterial cells *within* the human body as there are human cells (Abbott, 2016) or when the wastes of human civilization can be found even in the deepest and most remote areas of the ocean floor⁸ as well as in human placentas⁹? If we consider human beings as composite organisms

⁷ In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, Adam Dickinson (2014) discusses Harryette Mullen’s book-length poem, ‘S*PeRM**K*T’ as an exploration of the “non-place” of the supermarket which is “essentially a way station for shipping and receiving divorced from both the growing of food and the domestic sphere of consumption” (p. 143). Although relevant in terms of ecocriticism, this poem is very unlikely to be considered a nature poem.

⁸ See, “Single-use plastic reached the world’s deepest ocean trench at 10,898 m” (Chiba, S., et. al., 2018).

⁹ According to the abstract of *Plasticenta: First evidence of microplastics in human placenta*, “In total, twelve microplastic fragments... were found in four placentas [out of six] ... All of them were pigmented; three were identified as stained polypropylene a thermoplastic polymer, while for the other nine it was possible to identify only the pigments, which were all used for man-made coatings, paints, adhesives, plasters, finger paints, polymers and cosmetics and personal care products” (Ragusa, A., et. al., 2021, p. 1).

(akin to lichen) and the reach of synthetic, human-made materials as being total, there appears to be no appropriate place to draw the line between human and nature.

Interestingly, among the Romantic poets, John Keats has found renewed relevance in this era of the environmental crisis. Of particular interest to ecopoets and ecocritics is Keats' concept of negative capability which he first described in a letter to his brothers George and Tom in December 1818 as "...when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without irritable reaching after fact & reason..." (Keats, 1817, p. 193).

Li Ou (2009) expands on the meaning and significance of negative capability:

To be negatively capable is to be open to the actual vastness and complexity of experience, and one cannot possess this openness unless one can abandon the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge, safely guarding the self's identity, for a more truthful view of the world which is necessarily more disturbing or even agonizing for the self. (p. 2)

The concept of negative capability is not far from Donna Haraway's (2016) belief in "staying with the trouble" which she proposes:

requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings. (p. 1)

Haraway suggests that, in contemporary life, our knowledge is both excessive and insufficient. As a result, we are prone to either despair or to hope and Haraway claims "neither is a sensible attitude" (2016, p. 4). Negative capability encourages a more sensible attitude which does not fall within either extreme.

David Farrier (2019) uses negative capability to characterize the Anthropocene when he claims that

The Anthropocene involves us in a kind of deep-time negative capability, inducting us into the strangeness of a temporality that vastly exceeds both personal experience and intergenerational memory. (p. 5)

This attitude of ambiguity, when adopted by the poet, opens them to embodied, ecological experience. As Ou (2009) suggests, negative capability represents an "abnegation of the ego" which, in ecopoetry, allows *ecocentrism* to emerge (p. 184).

Thomas Gardner (2019) uses Jorie Graham as an example of a negatively capable poet. According to Gardner, Graham's poetry explores "how the body responds in the face of uncertainty and doubt, and how foregrounding that embodied situation creates a new form of listening crucial to fully inhabiting the world," (p. 184).

The concept of negative capability provides a clue to how we are to inhabit (and write about) our increasingly uncertain world in a time of increasingly complex crisis. It offers a crucial hint at how to move beyond the certainty of definition, of boundaries, of a sense of imminent doom and apocalyptic dread, or of naïve optimism, into realms of limitless possibility. Striving for an attitude of negative capability allowed me to reimagine the world and our relationships with it as unfathomably complex and ongoing.

Inhabitation and embodiment represent clear forms of ecological engagement for the poet to explore. Beyond the rhetoric of crisis, ecopoetics becomes an investigation and expression of open-ended and ongoing enmeshment.

ECOPOETICS

In his forward to Bryson's *Ecopoetry*, John Eder suggests a link between ecology and poetry, noting that "poetry...can manifest the intricate, adaptive, and evolving balance of an ecosystem" (Bryson, 2002, p. ix). Ecopoetics exemplifies an understanding of ecology and an interest in the formal possibilities that ecological thinking opens to the poet.

Knickerbocker (2012) describes the ecopoetics of poets who

Avoid simple representation of the natural world in favor of what I call 'sensuous poesis,' in which, rather than mirror the world, their poems enact through formal devices such as sound effects the speaker's experience of the complexity, mystery, and beauty of nature. (p. 13)

These ideas of manifestation and enactment suggest an embodied poetry situated in and born from the vitality of the complex world and the poet's experience of it. The ego is decentred through ecopoetics. In *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics*, poets John Kinsella and Forrest Gander (2012) describe an ecopoetic approach that exhibits "rigorous attention to patterning" and reorients us "towards intersubjectivity" (p.11).

Gander asks, “Aside from issues of theme and reference, how might syntax, line break, or the shape of the poem on the page express an ecological ethics?” (p. 2).

There are many ways to approach this question. For example, in *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*, Leonard Scigaj (1999) explores “nondualistic silence and sight as distinctive features of environmental poetry and ecopoetry” (p. 10). He described a poetics that “has consciously been influenced by a sensitivity to ecological thinking, especially in the areas of energy flow/retention, cyclic renewal, bioregionalism, and the interdependency of all organisms within an ecosystem” (p. 11). The affective and ecological qualities of energy flow, of dynamic association, and of patterning became key considerations in the development of my own ecopoetic techniques.

In terms of ecopoetics as a process of both study and creation, Jonathan Skinner claims a range of possibilities which include diverse approaches from,

...the making and study of pastoral and wilderness poetry to the intersection of poetry and animal studies, or from the poetics of urban environments to poets’ responses to disaster and matters of environmental justice. It might mean the study and development of formal strategies modelling ecological processes like complexity, nonlinearity, feedback loops, and recycling. (Hume, 2012, p. 755)

As editor of the magazine *ecopoetics*, Skinner (2005) conceived of a “taxonomy of nature writing (or of ecopoetry or ecopoetics)” consisting of four “species” (p. 128). The first is *topological*, representing poetry of place. The second is *tropological* poetry which casts “poems as somehow functioning like ecosystems or complex systems.” The third taxon is *entropological* poetics, “a practice engaged at the level of materials and processes, where entropy, transformation and decay are part of the creative work.” *Entropological* poetics might include concrete writing, as well as other kinds of ‘writing’ which may be more commonly associated with the visual arts. Skinner’s final form is *ethnological*, which seeks to learn about landscapes obscured by Western ‘nature’ through “translation outside of Western language and cultures” (p. 129).

These categories suggested by Skinner nearly twenty years ago represent different attitudes in ecopoetics which are not mutually exclusive, and which do not necessarily represent the full range of ecopoetic possibilities. Contemporary

ecopoetics, from the modernist and post-modernist traditions, encourages experimentation with language, form, and theme, as well as a self-reflexive awareness of process.

Evelyn Reilly's *Styrofoam* (2009) is an excellent example of an experimental eco-poetics. Her theme is Styrofoam, or as Lynn Keller (2015) suggests, the horrors of *Hyperobjects*.¹⁰ Her eco-poetic strategy includes a form which expands across the page and encourages attention to both the empty white space and the text. Interrelation is established, in part, through the sparse use of formal punctuation, which allows for an energetic flow in various directions. When Reilly does use punctuation, it is often as a dot without spacing between words, reminiscent of the punctuation in an Internet domain or digital code. Keller (2015) describes Reilly's poetry as "composed in significant part of found materials, bits of what might seem detritus brought together, 'to be anti-pure in the broken dust lingo'" and suggests that "anti-purity is valued as the consequence of the interrelation and mixing of elements in Reilly's poem" (p. 853). Perhaps most significantly, Reilly's poetic world is inclusive of digital territories as well as physical, and she borrows fragments of text from websites for her poems. *Styrofoam* evokes a vision of the world comprised of enmeshed natural and artificial elements. Reilly's eco-poetics proposes that ecology encompasses both the organic and the synthetic. Digital technology, the embodiment of human cultural efforts and achievement, is in juxtaposition with a concept of nature as what exists and happens beyond or in spite of human will or intention, yet together they form a vision of a complexly entangled and contradictory world.

In 2011, Angela Hume discussed eco-poetics with prominent eco-poets Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner. Reilly described eco-poetics as, "a way of thinking that can run through many different kinds of poetry" (Hume, 2012, p. 756). Hillman agreed adding that eco-poetics is also way of acting. The value of crisis in defining eco-poetics was a worry for Jonathan Skinner who suggested it "limited the kind of response needed over the long term—an everyday practice of responsibility to the earth" (Hume, 2012, p. 757).

¹⁰ Hyperobjects is a term coined by Timothy Morton to describe various synthetic and "fatal substances that will outlast [humans] and their descendants beyond any meaningful limit of self-interest." (Morton, 2013, p. 124).

Several poets became particularly influential in the development of my own eco-poetics, introducing me to diverse ways of approaching ecological topics, of expressing crisis, and of engaging with the entanglements of a complex world. The sensitivities they exhibit and the perspectives from which they write inspired my personal eco-poetic practices. To varying degrees, the philosophies and ethics of their eco-poetics had an impact on my decisions about content, form, tone, etc. I will discuss each in more detail below.

MARY OLIVER

Mary Oliver's attunement to the non-human world has been a source of inspiration throughout my life. Her poetry is largely responsible for bringing me into the eco-poetic fold. Yet, Oliver holds a somewhat controversial position in the discussion of eco-poetics. Jonathan Skinner's recommendation that we, "Think Mary Oliver for nature poetry, Gary Snyder for eco-poetry" (Skinner, 2005, p. 127) implies that Oliver's poetry does not quite qualify as eco-poetic.

Despite this, J. Scott Bryson's *Eco-poetry: A Critical Introduction* devotes two essays to exploring Oliver's environmental sensitivities. In his contribution, Jeffrey Thomson (2002) argues that, for Oliver, "nature is not simply the drapery of emotion; it is the very structure of emotional power" (p.155). He examines Oliver's work in the context of elegy and environmental mourning, claiming that her poetry is almost absent of "human grief, distinct and personal" and that instead "nature and the natural world define both the path and the function of the work of mourning" (p. 157). The human and the non-human become inseparable so that the pain of any loss reverberates through all of the connected parts of the vast human-nature body.

This sense of a world imbued with emotional connectivity in which human suffering and non-human suffering are felt throughout the system, encouraged me to write emotional currents within and between my poems. Mourning carries over. Grief passes between bodies (texts and their elements), expressing itself in diverse ways. It generates affect. The longing for a home and the pain of a home lost (to a bank, in a flood, to wildfire, or in a decision to move away, etc.) is universal and suggests that human troubles and non-human troubles are shared.

Laird Christensen (2002) locates Mary Oliver’s eco-poetic ethics in her willingness to engage with the environmental in ways that resist the outgrown narratives of the status quo. Oliver’s poems impart subtle wisdom, acting as a lesson on how to accept our place in a larger ecological community. Her poetry strives to teach us how to *be* in/of the world, through its affective impact. Laird contends that it is, “the constellation of emotions and implications that accrue to the words and flicker through the spaces between them” that “enact” the poems of Mary Oliver and make them lively and affective in the reader’s imagination (2002, p. 139).

Another important aspect of Oliver’s eco-poetics is her interrogative mood. By posing questions, especially rhetorically, the poem coaxes the reader into agreement with its implications. For example, in the poem ‘Music’ (1983) she asks,

Do you think the heart
is accountable? Do you think the body
any more than a branch of the honey locust tree,

hunting water,
hunching towards the sun,
shivering, when it feels
that good, into
white blossoms?

(p. 73)

The answer Oliver is prompting feels both assured and uncertain. It encourages faith in one’s own deeper understanding. Simply entertaining the possibility suggested by the poem opens us to a humbled acceptance of our close kinship with the rest of the natural world.

In my own work, I attempted to inspire a similar receptiveness to possibilities by writing a degree of uncertainty into my poems and by being critical of leading, direct, or objective statements. When my poems are certain it is generally ironic or in the expression of something challenging or too abstract to comprehend clearly. I wanted to compel the reader away from both disbelief and certainty and to situate them somewhere between the two—in a state of being unaffiliated but interested—akin to what Mary Oliver creates in her poetry.

Humble reverence and a willingness to become emotionally vulnerable in her relationship with the natural world are definitive of Oliver's ecopoetics. I was inspired to embrace similar mentalities in my own.

ARTHUR SZE

The ecopoetics of Arthur Sze were also influential to my writing. Sze poems are energetic and elicit genuine wonder. The affective impact of his poetry comes from his skill at weaving images and sounds so deftly that, at times, reading them is truly breathtaking.

Sze's ecopoetics relies heavily on fragmentation and slippage. The use of fragmented and dissimilar images "produce multiple temporalities", illuminating a web of relation that draws together elements across space and time (Xiaoqing, 2002, p. 182). Like Reilly, Sze often composes through collage, a technique which avoids a sequential logic and rather embraces the possibility of creating unexpected connections.

As David Axelrod (2000) remarks, the movement of Sze's poetry encourages the mind to construct, "a web of mutalities, a connective tissue that holds these fragments together" (p. 474). The effect of this is a bridging of logical gaps, a willingness to integrate unlikely relationships into one's worldview.

Arthur Sze's poetry also had particular relevance to my work because of his interest in energy flow, which has been inspired by the *I Ching*. In his writing, Sze has explored how yin and yang energies can be possessed by either solid or fragmented blocks of text (Elshtain, 2004/05, p. 205) and how the form on the page generates or dissipates energy.

In an interview with Eric Elshtain (2004/2005), Sze claimed that writing poetic sequences allows him to "develop a complexity that intensifies as well as enlarges the scope and the resonance of a poem" (p. 202). He conceives of juxtaposition as a possible "active structural principle" in his poetry, a foundation on which to develop patterns of relation. Sze is also conscious of the way the space on the page can create "charged points of transformation" (Elshtain, 2004/05, pp. 202-203). Sze has a need

to disrupt his own sense of control when it becomes too great and to allow the poem to orient itself towards unpredictable revelations.

Sze's discursive and wandering poetics inspired me. There is a sense that his poems *live* and strive to produce themselves and that he is a collaborator in their making. The drifting nature of his poems influenced my work and encouraged me to follow disruptive trains of thought as they emerged during the writing and editing process. By allowing my intention to dissolve and be lost, and to drift among natural associations, I was able to alight on unexpected connections. This practice also encouraged me to explore issues of agency and control and to interrogate how sliding away into abstraction can be an affective form of acquiescence.

The mentality Arthur Sze demonstrates is one that is inclusive and attentive to temporal and spatial flows which generate currents among bodies. In the Sze's own words,

I want to be paradoxically rooted in the flux of the world, and I'm drawn to the points and to the edge where light turns into dark, and dark into light. As part of this process, I'm interested in demolishing hierarchy: a butterfly opening its wings may be of equal importance as the death of a friend in a car crash. (Baker, 2012, p. 193)

JOHN KINSELLA

The Australian poet John Kinsella's concept of *international regionalism* had a significant impact on my writing. International regionalism responds to "the need to create understanding through written and oral models that highlight what makes a place unique while contextualising with comparisons to other localities" (Kinsella, 2017, p. 6). Kinsella believes that through this practice,

a multi-layered and cumulative picture of place emerges (historical, communal, changing environments). In this picture relationships between people, between people and animals and plants, people and the material of the land itself, necessarily change and alter hierarchies of interaction. (p. 4)

The poem 'The Frozen Sea' collected in Kinsella's *Poems: 1980-1994* (1997), provides a good example of how Kinsella's poetry engages with the local while simultaneously casting the net much further. The poem is divided into twenty sections, many of which have subsections. There is significant juxtaposition

throughout the poem, with images of water and ice abutting images of a scorched desert. It intermingles personal recollections (section 4. Early Recollections of The South-West) with cultural allusion (section 9. Orpheus & Faust — 2 Legends), descriptions of natural phenomenon (section 14. Desert Fruit), and texts which are italicised and appear to belong to another voice, perhaps from the past (section 16. The Return).

Although often situated in the wheatbelt of Western Australia, Kinsella's poems draw in and implicate the international and the universal. In the poem 'Hive Liberty' from his collection *Jam Tree Gully*, Kinsella (2012) uses simile to liken dead and collapsing York gum trees to "a star losing its mass" (p.33). This unlikely comparison between a dead tree, native to Western Australia, and a massive cosmic phenomenon demonstrates how Kinsella uses the local as a frame through which to illuminate spatially and temporally distant relationships. Much like Arthur Sze, Kinsella's ecopoetic imagination seeks to reveal links between phenomenon by shifting across vastly different scales.

As my collection developed, I became increasingly conscious of the significance of place in my engagement with the environment. Kinsella's poetics embrace a vision of the local which highlights the numerous environmental and social processes that enable us to experience places as distinct. Kinsella's work encouraged me to be attentive to the way my poems were situated in (or between) various places and expressed both their differences and similarities.

JOHN BURNSIDE

John Burnside's ecopoetics reflect his active, immersive engagement with environments and liminal spaces. He is a poet of encounter, immediacy, and imagination. The poem 'Erosion' from Burnside's collection *All One Breath* (2014) is an excellent example of how, though rooted in a particular moment, a poem can draw together relations which reach between bodies, across various spatial and temporal spans. The poem begins with the poet "alone at home" working in his yard and noticing an old farmer over the road "laying waste to his fields." The two men are a reflection, both working, but in different ways. The poet speculates on the farmer's ways then returns to the immediate landscape and the calls of birds

...from the stones
and hedgerows, chiffchaff
and starling, dunnock, the elegant
wren by the wall and the usual
flash mob of crows at the gate, all flutter and strut,
where something has died
in the wheels of a passing car

(p. 77)

From here, he digresses again and muses on his grandfather, what he did and how he smelled

of whisky
and Oxydol
– *As for man, his days are as grass;
as a flower of the field, so he
flourisheth* – thistle
and mayweed, ground elder, Yorkshire Fog,
the sap on my hands drying fast
in the afternoon heat,
the thistledown drifting away
to another season

(p. 78)

Again, the poem wanders between thoughts and memories and back into the poet's situatedness in the landscape. He begins naming plants and grass. He becomes aware of his own body. It continues in the same fashion, to pull into the web another neighbour who the poet loathes for his "indifference to all/he cannot buy or use" (p. 79).

Louisa Gairn characterises Burnside's poetry as, "an ecological 'line of defence', providing a space in which reader and author can examine their relationship to the world around them" (2008, p. 156). Burnside's poems test the hazy borders between realms by moving freely among past, present, future, between the local and the universal, between the real and the imagined. Andy Brown (2012) gives the example of the poem 'Suburbs' in which Burnside's interest in liminality is

manifested in images of private, enclosed spaces and public exterior spaces; driveways, garden borders, walls, and fences ... windows, doors, drawn blinds and parted curtains; skins and pond edges. (p. 321)

Scott Brewster (2013) claims that Burnside's poetry often interrogates the fringes, the "marginal terrain or hinterland that human design variously encroaches upon or

discards” (p. 184) and the “liminal but potent waste grounds of suburbia” (p.178). Burnside’s poetic encounters with the natural world exhibit humility, inquisitiveness, and “an appreciation of the remoteness of the natural world from human understanding” (Brewster, 2013, p. 183).

The political philosophy which inspires Burnside’s work is rarely explicit in his poetry, yet it is part of what drives his work and lies at the heart of his process. He, for instance, considers walking a form of activism and an essential creative act. Walking and “being out in the open,” have “a fundamental influence on the form and music of poetry” (Burnside, 2006, p. 101). As walkers, he claims “we are capable of restoring our ecological accords” (Burnside, 2006, p. 105).

I was inspired by John Burnside’s liminal movements and drifting. His simple, direct language allows a larger readership to engage with his poetry and its attunement to landscapes, their stories, and their histories. His negotiation of invisible boundaries and his interest in the immersive and immediate influenced how I approached writing my collection.

JORIE GRAHAM

During my research, I was also drawn to the poetry and poetics of Jorie Graham. The attention Graham pays to the world in which she dwells expresses a receptiveness to the mysteries of the material, non-human world. Dean Anthony Brink (2017) suggests that Graham’s is a “coherent poetics of engagement” and that her “non-place-based poetics...goes beyond classical nature poetry or earlier formulations of ecopoetry” (p. 387). Brink goes on to write, Graham’s “poetry resembles a multivectoral cacophony of dialogic voices that have overcome prosaic linearity as it also engages a material interestedness that suggests posthuman shared interactivity” (p. 385).

Formally, Graham enacts an embodied engagement with the world. In her collections *Place* (2012) and *Sea Change* (2008), the poems consistently follow a standard form in which a long line is followed by a short line (or several short lines, or in some cases a single word) enjambed to the centre of the page, which is followed by another long line, and so on. This approach establishes an overall patterning and

flow, reminiscent of ripples or waves. The flow is not smooth, however, and reading is disrupted when line endings often break syntax or separate the beginning and the ending of fragments. Punctuation also serves to both create and disrupt the energetic flow of the poems. For example, the poem ‘Untitled Lullaby’ from *Sea Change* contains abundant commas, hyphens, and ampersands throughout its three pages of text, however there is only a single full stop, at the end of the last line of the poem. This gives the impression of breathlessness and a kind of rush forward, but with many small obstructions in the way. In contrast, the next poem in the collection, ‘No Long Way Round’ uses full-stops heavily as with the opening line of the poem; “Evening. Not quite. High winds again.” (Graham, 2008, p. 54). Although the poems look similar on the page, the energy of one is a fluid spillage, and the other is a hard, staccato pulsing.

I was interested in Graham’s cadence and methods of generating energy in her poetry. Roghayeh Farsi (2017) discusses Graham’s poem ‘Fuse’, from the collection *Swarm* (2000), in terms of chaos and complexity. In this single poem the author identifies “instances of interruptions, irruptions, dissipations, and turbulence” which create a dynamic and unpredictable text (p. 3). They also note the nonlinearity of the poem, which is also a prominent feature of chaotic systems. Chaos is expressed syntactically through “repetition, substitution, subtraction, and displacement” (Farsi, 2017, p. 4). Farsi also identifies pun as a method of creating chaotic instability because it allows the text to suggest multiple possibilities and meanings.

The poets I have discussed inspired me to develop an ecopoetics which demonstrates certain ecologically sensitive mentalities and processes. These ecopoetics exhibit a discursive, drifting, explorative approach which is both playful and reverent and which is situated in states of receptiveness and uncertainty. They are attentive to the construction of place and storied spaces. My ecopoetics also stem from an interest in developing critical practices of embodiment, ecological engagement, and self-reflexivity. The specific techniques and styles which characterize my process are elaborated in greater detail in the Methods section.

Ecopoetics present many possibilities for engagement with embodiment, place, and especially the flux of energies and intensities that define ecological and affective

systems. To better understand how these energies occur in nature (in feedback loops, resonances, etc.) I studied complex dynamic system and chaos theory.

Complexity, Chaos, and Assemblage Theory

The study of complexity and chaos (cosmological, ecological, and literary) became important in the development of my collection. Complexity allowed me to reconceptualize nature not as a system violently thrown out of harmonious ecological balance by human beings, but as a system naturally besieged with chaotic fluctuations and disorder.

In Ilya Prigogine's and Isabelle Stengers' *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*, I discovered several ideas which became central to the approach I took in writing my collection. As Alvin Toffler suggests in the foreword to the text, "most of reality, instead of being orderly, stable, and equilibrating, is seething and bubbling with change, disorder, and process" (Prigogine & Stengers, 2017, p. xv). Entropy is a central concept in the science of complexity and chaos. It is, very simply put, a measure of disorder. P.C.W. Davies (2013) states that "the second law [of thermodynamics] predicts an inexorable rise of overall entropy with time, and a concomitant growth in disorder" (p. 19). This "one-way slide of the universe towards total disorder" (p. 19) suggests *an arrow of time*, which signifies the irreversibility of processes and points towards an increasingly complex, disordered, and unpredictable future.

Fluctuation and instability, too, play a significant role in dynamic systems. Prigogine and Stengers (2017) write, "Our universe has a pluralistic, complex character. Structures may disappear, but also they may appear" (p. 9). Spontaneous self-organization and order emerge out of chaos. I began to imagine chaos and disorder not as fixed states, but as *processes*, in which systems can exhibit the unpredictable emergence of order and can be agitated back into spillage and disorder by the slightest shift in energy.

An important text for my understanding of complexity in terms of literary expression was Katherine Hayles' *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamic Systems in Literature and Science*. Hayles (1991) writes,

The world as chaotic envisions it...is rich in unpredictable evolutions, full of complex forms and turbulent flows, characterized by nonlinear relations between cause and effects, and fractured into multiple-length scales... (p. 8)

Chaotic systems exhibit irregular forms and unpredictable couplings. When Hayles (1991) asks, “What characteristics could be shared by schizophrenic eye movement and the fluctuations in cotton price, dripping faucets and measles epidemics?” (p. 10) she is expressing a truth about chaos, but she may just as well be presenting an ecopoetic prompt. It was not important for my poetry to address this question literally but to encourage a view which accepts the reality of such unexpected associations and relations.

A point of convergence for complexity and chaos, affect, and ecology is the concept of assemblage which deals with “the play of contingency and structure, organization and change” (Wise, 2013, p. 77). In portraying an ecological system, assemblage theory provides a way of imagining how the elements within the poems and the collection emerge as active compositions of interrelation.¹¹

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2013) describe an assemblage as such:

there are lines of articulation of segmentarity, strata and territories; but also, lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitute an assemblage... it is a multiplicity. (p. 2)

Assemblages represent dynamic systems as well, because they, “are in constant variation, are themselves constantly subject to transformation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 95).

What assemblages *do* is “select elements from the milieu (the surroundings, the context, the mediums in which the assemblages work) and bring them together in a particular way” (Wise, 2013, p. 78). Assemblages deal with the dynamic qualities of elements which become dismantled and circulate. Wise claims,

The concept of assemblage shows us how institutions, organizations, bodies, practices and habits make and unmake each other, intersecting and transforming; creating territories and then unmaking them, deterritorializing,

¹¹ Wise (2013) stresses that the French term *agencement*, from which assemblage is derived, “is not *the arrangement* or *organization* but the *process* of arranging, organizing, fitting together” (p. 77).

opening lines of flight as a possibility of an assemblage, but also shutting them down. (2013, p. 86)

For Deleuze and Guattari (2013) chaos can factor into the constitution of an assemblage. They write,

From chaos, *Milieus* and *Rhythms* are born.... Chaos is not without its own directional components, which are its own ecstasies.... all kinds of milieus, each defined by a component, slide in relation to one another, over one another. Every milieu is vibratory, in other words, a block of spacetime constituted by the periodic repetition of components. (p. 364)

I conceived of my poetry as forming a complex, chaotic assemblages of signification, of variously weighted meanings, associated at various speeds through diverse imagery, with unpredictable and emergent properties. I explored how each poem shifted the assemblage into a different phase, how they created lines of articulation. In doing so, I attempted to create a sense of complexity, of energetic flow, and to engage with the enmeshment of meaning and material across multiple scales. Considering chaos, complexity, and the characteristics of an assemblage, I embraced Hayle's (1991) insistence on a "movement from being to becoming, essence to process..." (p. 28).

The Trouble: Anthropocene Discourses and Mediated Nature

The final topic of research around which all other subjects coalesced is the notion of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a powerful concept. Farrier (2019) calls its "temporality... deeply menacing" (p. 2). All aspects of my research seemed to gravitate towards this concept, which is of both a real, long-term, state of crisis and crucially, a new state of awareness through which the mind's reality is brought into accord with the crisis of material reality. The Anthropocene is a nightmare realization. It is a psychic quicksand. It is becoming conscious that the apple is fatally poisonous only *after* eating it; having, in fact, planted vast orchards of poisonous apples and developed a global economy around and dependent upon poisonous apples. The force of this type of awareness is what expels a child from carefree, blissful imagining into the agony of adult comprehension. It is an irrevocable, no-turning-back loss of innocence, and it is an awareness imbued with heartrending guilt and deep terror.

Whatever trouble had long been brewing between human beings and the Earth had been doing so in relative obscurity, confined to the shadows, going unnoticed or unmentioned, or else misrepresented in the primary narratives of the West (which, it seems, was a key perpetrator of the trouble). There had been acute instances and anecdotal accounts of things not being *quite* right, but they were isolated incidents, not symptoms of a larger problem and not linked to one another. Overall, humanity was prospering, progressing, historically moving in the right direction. Civilization was growing, expanding, getting better all the time through the development of technological innovations. There was no need to hit the breaks or interrupt this ever-upward trajectory.

One of the first efforts to draw attention to the issue of environmental destruction was in 1864, when George Perkins Marsh published *Man and Nature*, in which he explored, in detail and with supporting data, the destructive influence human societies have on the environment (Goudie, 1993). A century later, when Rachel Carson attempted to drag the trouble out into the open in 1962 with her exposé on DDT and toxic pollution, many took notice. Yet, the environmental movement she inspired was largely a fringe movement with ideals in opposition to the status quo of the Western world and the collective understanding of society's more pressing concerns (often economic growth). Only a couple of decades later, news of melting ice caps, endangered species, and 'global warming' once again shone a light on the trouble, which had been deepening and complicating for a very long time and was, by then, a huge snarling, tentacular, tangle of trouble which was becoming more and more difficult to ignore. Again, some began to attend to this view of humanity's relationship with the world and the tragic consequences of the so-called 'necessary evils' of modern civilization. Then came the Anthropocene.¹² A single word. Not a lengthy treatise, an exposé or cultural movement, yet the term lays bare the whole sprawling and horrific reality of this long-lurking and ever-evolving trouble. It is a reality-check. It is a finger pointed and a verdict passed.

¹² Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz (2017) challenge the representation of "the last 250 years as the progressive emergence from an initial unawareness of environmental damage" and "as the gradual rise of an environmental movement that was initially embryonic and gradually matured" (p. 290), yet, when we consider increasing awareness of environmental damage in relation to an expanding lexicon of environmental terms and the proliferation of associated discourses, then neologisms such as "Anthropocene" surely represent a progressive emergence and deepened awareness.

The Anthropocene is a proposed geological period following the Holocene in which human effects on the environment outweigh natural changes (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000), and are expected to remain evident in the geological record for millions of years (Crutzen et. al., 2007). In their early formulation of the Anthropocene, Crutzen and Stoermer were predominantly interested in measures of CO₂ in the atmosphere over time. Thus, they proposed 1850 as the start of this new epoch as it marked a rise in emissions linked to industrialization. Others have proposed equally provocative dates. 1610 might have been the fateful year because there appears a marked drop in CO₂ likely due in part to the massive decline of humans in the Americas associated with European exploration, violence, and disease. This resulted in almost total cessation of farming and fire-use and subsequently the regeneration of forests and grasslands. Alternatively, 1964 is proposed as a date because it corresponds with the Great Acceleration, the period after the second World War characterized by, “population expansion globalization, mass production, technological and communications revolutions, improved farming methods and medical advances” (Vince, 2016, p. 3). In the geological record, the Great Acceleration also registers a peak in the level of plutonium isotopes found in sediments associated with bomb testing (Lewis & Maslin, 2015).¹³

The term Anthropocene is suggestive. It is what George Myerson and Yvonne Rydin (1996) call a “new concept discourse”, one which “shocks with a new way of thinking” (p. 22). It is a discussion which generates meanings, and, significantly, “meanings become the ‘situation’” (pp. 2-3). Speculating on when the Anthropocene began paints an alternative picture of human history in which the intrepid explorers of the New World and the visionary scientists of the modern era are at best fatally negligent and at worst mass murderers who have doomed all of humanity (and possibly planetary life) to slow, agonizing death.

What interested me in my research was the recent widespread use of the term Anthropocene, loaded with implicit guilt, and the acceptance of its narrative; a vision of human history driven by greed and destruction, rather than progressive improvement. Accepting the Anthropocene means accepting an irreparable rift between human beings and the Earth, damage done, no way to expunge the record

¹³ This period of Great Acceleration also registers the presence of lead isotopes in ice cores and microplastics in marine sediments.

for at least a few million years. Here again, is the irreversible arrow of time, and here again is entropy, mixing microplastics into our oceans and blood.

Discourses of the Anthropocene are extremely affective. They are deeply upsetting. They are multidimensional and draw things into them like a vortex, implicating and elucidating. They overwhelm and immobilize. We live in an age dominated by anxiety and anger, as Dodd (2011) and Roszak (2001) both argue so effectively. A pervasive sense of dread is a consequence of the complex machinery of our self-destruction made visible (though hardly comprehensible) by the concept of the Anthropocene.

The particular anxiety of the Anthropocene has been building for decades. According to Nicole Merola (2018), March 29, 1958, as a date “crucial for both contextualizing and formulating Anthropocene anxiety, as affect specifically concerned with inaction in the face of and worry about global socioecological change” (p. 25). This date “marks the first data point on the now iconic Keeling Curve, a graph of atmospheric CO₂ measurements at the Mauna Loa Observatory” (p. 25). As it happens, 1958 is also the year Rachel Carson began writing her environmental exposé *Silent Spring*, so perhaps something was ‘in the air’ that led to a clearer understanding of that long-lurking trouble, in the form of data and statistics.

Of course, many poets and writers were already keenly aware of the trouble and knew where it lived. They inhabited the world with enough attention to have noticed the damage being done and the terrifying trajectory of human civilization. In the 1920s and 1930s Robinson Jeffers (who died the year Carson’s *Silent Spring* was published) expressed a particular dismay at the destructive tendencies of human beings. In his poem ‘The Purse-Seine’ he conveys a kind of horror at the “vast populations incapable of free/survival” gathered in cities where they are “insulated/From the strong earth” (Hunt, 1989, p. 518). He compares cities to fishing nets in which masses of fish became helplessly trapped. Geneva Gano (2021) contends that Jeffers’ poetry communicates “bewilderment, shame, and humiliation” (p. 6) at his role as a human bring within the web of ecology, suggesting that, had he lived to encounter it, the Anthropocene would have come to no surprise to Jeffers.

Today, what Carson and Jeffers, and many other observant and sensitive poets knew is common knowledge. Environmental crisis is centre stage, and the trouble walks in

broad daylight, branded for all to know as the Anthropocene. Nature has ended, has disintegrated into chaos and seepage, has been subsumed by civilization.

Jeremy Davies (2016) offers an idea of what the Anthropocene *does* when he writes that it “redistributes agencies, reconfigures systems, and reorders the loops of consequence and assimilation out of which the workings of the earth are made” (p. 8). The world in the Anthropocene, as Davies perceives it, “is seen as characteristically full of devious chains of cause and effect; of intricate braids that link economies to ocean current and ecosystems to plate tectonics” (p. 9). Ecocriticism cannot escape this reality and as Andrew McMurry (2014) so passionately states, “All ecocritical interventions are eulogies to the dead and the doomed: places, species, cultures, natures” (p. 487).

Significantly, much of what we experience of the more-than-human world is now mediated by ubiquitous technologies which are themselves influenced and often sponsored by those who align themselves with the trouble: corporate advertisers, politicians, and other groups with various enterprising and exploitative agendas. McMurry (2014) provocatively suggests, “For many children in the media-narcotized West, the only extant ducks are Donald and Daffy” (p. 494).

The modern experience which has given rise to the Anthropocene and its increasingly prolific discourse is defined, in part, by an overwhelming amount of information about the environment which is facilitated by communication technologies. Indeed, technology plays an enormous part in the Anthropocene both as an historic perpetrator, but also as a mediator and driver of its narratives. Technology provides discourses of the environment which are loaded with affective cues, manipulating our feelings about the environment and assigning it value. Barnie (1996) draws attention to “the films which almost nightly are screened on television as part of high technology’s lament and farewell to a Romantically perceived nature” (p. 78). How do nature films mediate our perceptions of nature? Barnie (1996) suggests,

listen to the disjunction that often occurs between ‘voice-over’, with its enumeration of zoological and environmental facts, and the yearning burden of music which accompanies the panorama of the vanishing herds of the plains, the haunted-eyed creatures of the night forest. (p. 78)

This Great *Information* Acceleration (which will perhaps be as visible in the psychic strata as nuclear explosions are in geological) is without a doubt a source of

Anthropocene anxiety. The news media—an historically trusted, authoritative source—use striking metaphor in their reports and create new terms for conceiving of the environment. Uninterrupted connection to electronic devices creates a constant flow of information, creates a continuously shifting picture and new languages of the environment and crisis, creates a rapidly changing discourse. It becomes clear that technology plays a complex part in the propagation of Anthropocene discourse and the changing way modern people conceive of their relationship with plants, animals, and both local and global environments.

Sam Solnick (2016) explains that the Anthropocene poses “fundamental questions about the relationships between local and global, individual and collective, economy and ecology, thought, and technology” (p. 4). The aspects of the Anthropocene dealing with information technology and communication became of particular interest to me, as they provided a way of further exploring how environmental anxiety and grief become pervasive. In my research I was increasingly critical of the frequency and intensity of news reports and articles covering environmental topics. I was especially interested in the proportion and language of reports on local concerns compared to global. I became critical of when, how, and where I was encountering messages about nature and the environmental crisis and aware of the way technology mediated my experiences and perceptions of nature.

I also noted when I encountered poems in which this phenomenon of mediation was present or when the poet is displaced by an invasive environmental message which confuse the immediate with the distant. This contradictory sense of simultaneous distance from natural phenomenon and immediate experience of it is conveyed beautifully in Jorie Graham’s poem ‘Salmon’ (1983) which begins:

I watched them once, at dusk, on television, run,
in our motel room halfway-through
Nebraska, quick, glittering, past beauty, past
the importance of beauty,
archaic,
not even hungry, not even endangered, driving deeper and deeper
into less.

(p. 40)

From the start there is a confusion and blurring between the mediated narrative of the salmon run and the immediate experience of the narrator engaging with it. We do not

know if it is dusk in Nebraska where the narrator sits in her hotel room before a television, or if it is (was) dusk when the salmon ran. This confusion between what we experience with our own bodies and senses and what we are shown or told is an important aspect of engagement with mediated nature in the Anthropocene. It is something that Graham does especially well. For example, the titular poem of her collection *Sea Change* (2008) begins:

One day: stronger wind than anyone expected. Stronger than
ever before in the recording
of such. Un-
natural says the news. Also the body says it.

(p. 3)

It is significant that the news is the first source of this information and the body the second, which sounds in agreement, although the splitting of the word ‘unnatural’ across two lines also implies the message is mixed and the news says both ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’. We do not know whether the news tells the poet what her body already knows or if her body only realizes it because of the news. This uncertainty raises an interesting consideration about environmental discourses in the Anthropocene, in which bodily, immediate knowing is less reliable (or less readily available) than technologically mediated information.

Another excellent example of news mediation comes from Camille Dungy’s poem ‘A Massive Dying Off’ which references National Public Radio (NPR) twice. The radio broadcast acts as a mediator of environmental awareness and a source of distressing information. Dungy writes of, “The five-fingered sea stars you heard about on NPR.” and later a more impassioned voice is heard: “*A massive dying off, further displacing / depleted oxygen*, cried the radio announcer.” (Cardenas & Tuckey, 2018, p.252-254). The radio announcer’s phrase, “a massive dying off” leaves such an impression on the poet that it becomes her title and definitive in her imagination. It is telling that the poem’s narrator encounters news of environmental crisis while driving to Costco.¹⁴ This seemingly mundane experience, with subtexts of fossil fuel consumption/CO₂ pollution and overconsumption, is the context in which the narrator becomes aware, through the news media, of ecological disaster.

¹⁴ Costco is a wholesaler where customers are encouraged to buy in bulk.

The local and immediate experience of environmental damage in which the narrator is participating is a secondary concern to that reported by the sensational news story.

Today, what we think and feel about the environment and the way we understand and express our ecological relationships are technologically mediated by discourses in extremely complex ways. As Solnick (2016) so eloquently writes,

The intricacies of technologically mediated communication means that individuals' environmental awareness is not only a matter of education but dynamically bound up with beliefs, sensations, memories, prejudices and patterns of consumption. (p. 10)

The tech-driven mediation of environmental discourse represents yet another complex system, which links to affective systems and to ecological systems. The Anthropocene, as a technologically mediated awareness of human responsibility for long-term ecological collapse, provided a frame through which I explored a complex and affective experience of environmental connection. My research of the Anthropocene and its discourses influenced both the thematic content of my collection and the structure and form of several of my poems, as well as the collection as a whole. I worked to develop an ecopoetics which engaged with my research of dynamic systems and energy flow, and which is undeniably situated in the Anthropocene, but above all, which conveys the complex affective experience of ecological enmeshment.

PROCESS AND METHODS

Techniques Towards Ecopoetics and Anthropocene Affect

My poetics is fundamentally interested in negotiating the concept and experience of the Anthropocene and its associated affects and implications. The horrors of the Anthropocene are its subtlety and longevity as well as its pervasiveness. I wanted my poetry to convey this sense of the Anthropocene, the imprint of the human hand appearing at every turn, and the uneasy recurrence of its affect. I focused on poetic methods of concentrating and disbursing energies, of pivoting between lull and anxiety, and expressing unexpected entanglements through patterning and formal techniques.

Farrier (2019) writes,

an Anthropocene poetics is, in part, a matter of intersecting orders of difference—fast and slow, great and small, deep and shallow time interacting in and through human action to shape the world that also, in turn, shapes us. (p. 52)

Techniques of accretion (of images, rhythms, and sounds) allude to an expanding web of association, into which disparate elements are drawn and related. This web hints at an increasingly complex, always only partial vision of our world. By establishing patterns and disrupting them with shifts in tone, perspective, or form, chaotic potentials emerged and triggered affective responses. Musicality and cadence, created through rhythm, alliteration, line length, etc., are also affective techniques that generate energy and provide opportunities for dissonance and bewilderment. A crucial challenge in my process was developing methods of leaving the poems inconclusive, unresolved, and on-going.

POETIC IMAGE, SENSUALITY, AND WAYS OF SEEING

My poetry relies heavily on the formation of an affective poetic image. By poetic image I mean sensuous description which, in relation to the voice, sound, and structure of the poem create an overall image—the encompassing vision of the poem. This idea of poetic image treats “the entire poem as a kind of matrix or crystallized form of energy, as if the poem were an abstract image” (Mitchell, 1993, p. 557).

C. Day Lewis (1968) writes, “The poetic image is the human mind claiming kinship with everything that lives or has lived, and making good its claim” (p. 35). To Lewis, the poetic image enforces the relationships between patterns in poetry and patterns in the real world.

I composed my poems with the intention of evoking an affective poetic image. Descriptive imagery, coloured by tones and sounds, reveal patterns, lines of kinship and affiliations. I wanted each poem to act as its own image of the world or as William Carlos Williams put it, “a complete little universe” (Williams, 1963, p. 224). Each poem’s unique vision also adds texture, tone, and meaning to the overall vision of the collection. The concept of assemblage is useful in imagining how, when particular elements are associated, something *happens*. On one level, what happens is

the poem. When the images, sounds, and tones of many poems associate with one another, it is another assemblage, another *happening*.

My use of the term ‘vision’ should not suggest that the imagery which defines the poetic image is strictly visual. It, of course, includes other sensual information. In the poem, ‘Tupelo, Mississippi 1936’, for example, descriptions of sound are fundamental to the formation of the poetic image. The poem begins with the intense sounds of a baby wailing while a massive tornado, which sounds like “a train running down/the surrounding houses,” passes over. The poem moves into the stillness and quiet of the storm’s aftermath. Then there is the sound of whispered voices followed by low moans rising from rubble, which turn into cries for help. The poem concludes with the image/sound of a mother gently humming a song close to her baby’s ear, to obscure the other woeful noises. An ellipse ends the final line which both presumes the song to follow can be inferred and also represents aposiopesis, literally *becoming silent*.

The juxtaposition of loud, terrifying sounds with eerie silence, and the soft, sweet sound of a mother humming to her child, in addition to the visual image of surrounding destruction, convey a poetic image of slow, shocked disbelief and the quiet horror of survival. In ‘Tupelo, Mississippi 1936’, like many of the poems in my collection, I paid close attention to how visual imagery and other sensual description create tension, working with or against the tone, and establish the overall vision of the poem.

The poem ‘Air Quality Report’ is another example of a poem in which non-visual sensual description creates the poetic image; in this case the description is primarily olfactive. The sense of smell forms the general unpleasant image of a world in which the quality of the air is poor and is full of competing organic and inorganic odours.

Although I actively involved other sensual description in my poetry, visual imagery remained fundamental. When I first became interested in birds, I was a *birdwatcher*. I learned to identify birds by sight before I learned to identify their songs and calls. Looking and visually observing are still the most basic ways I engage with the natural world. Vision is also an essential sensual way of engaging in the mediated world of digital images and videos, which is suggestive of both the attraction of the digital and its limited sensual power.

Although sight may seem the most rudimentary and obvious sense, there are many distinct and nuanced ways of seeing. Differences between watching and looking suggest degrees of attention and intention. We might passively watch T.V., but we might also watch, in anticipation, for something to happen. Meanwhile, to look also means to seek. There is something distinct about witnessing, which implies an activity centred in the visual but involving greater perceptual contexts. It is a term which is easily associated with both law and religion, and which suggests the privilege and authority of being present at (although perhaps not a participant in) an important event.

Visual descriptions evoke activity or stillness and allow the reader to negotiate distance. In my collection I often describe sequences of images to create movement, to emulate the movement of the eye as it observes, glances off of something, or comes to rest on something unusual, unexpected, or startling, as at the end of ‘Ghoul Box’ and ‘Dreaming in Edward Abbey Country’.

Acts of watching, looking, and seeing are also thematically important throughout my collection. In ‘The Sleepwalkers’, for example, the workers are “passing/in-between without a glance”, oblivious to the aberrant world around them, while others in the poem become transfixed, “go deep/Under something like a spell of gazing” and remain that way, as if in a dream state, for hours. The titular ‘Bold Jumping Spider’ watches the narrator with a sort of fixed attention and interest which leads to a humbling moment of communion and profound reverence. And, of course, in ‘Birdwatching’ the importance of watching birds hints at a greater lesson in attentiveness and the importance of the ongoing engagement of looking/seeking, without finality.

My interest in the nuanced ways of seeing led me to change the final lines of the poem ‘Birdwatching’ from “Watch/as it rises into the sky. Watch/as it climbs” to “Look/as it rises into the sky. Look/as it climbs.” Set apart at the end of each line, “Look” becomes an imperative, actively directing the attention towards the object in the sky. It also hints to the later poem, ‘Arizona in Winter’ in which the narrator discovers a fossil in a rock and calls to the playing children, “Behold! A fossilized fern. Look!” beckoning, so that they might see it too.

Colourful visual descriptions were also an effective way of rooting the poems in a familiar, material world. I use colour frequently throughout the collection as a painter might use a solid line, to delineate between two forms: the literal and the poetic. The use of basic, unadorned colours such as red, yellow, blue, black, green, and grey encourages a sense of fundamental reality, without poetic ornamentation, which tethers the reader to a real, accessible world. Colour, in my collection, is often a device for the sensually comfortable and unambiguous, out of which opportunities for juxtaposition and friction arise.

For example, the poem 'Crawlspaces' uses simple colours throughout with different effects. The first two instances, "brown dust" and "grey grit", are direct and simply descriptive. It might as well read 'dust dust' and 'grit grit' for how much the colour lends to the noun. Later, "sunny yellow weeds" is slightly more suggestive. Rather than simply saying 'dandelions' it creates a mild contradiction between the welcome sense of 'sunny yellow' and the unwelcome sense of 'weeds'. In the next line, "a long black whip" counters the brightness of the weeds to create friction and unease. I chose 'black' over stronger words such as 'sable' for several reasons. I appreciated the closeness of 'sable' to the word 'stable' which affirms the setting. 'Sable' also evokes an image of sleek animal fur and might be a more appropriate term for the horse than for the whip. The weight of 'sable' is much greater than 'black' and creates a richer and more meaningful atmosphere. 'Black', on the other hand, sounds like the 'crack' of the whip and has a sense of clear, plain, unarguable certainty. It is punctuation. 'Black' also pairs more perfectly with 'white', which is the final colour in the poem and appears in the line "The old barns stand out in white." It is the most suggestive and ambiguous of the colours. Because it ends the line, it might be assumed to be an adjective. However, there is no noun for it to modify on the following line. We are left to guess at what is white. The most obvious answer is whatever surrounds the barn. The environment. A white, snowy, winter environment. So 'white' is the image of an entire season in a single word, an intentional simplification and omission, which enables the mind to form its own image. The different weights of the simple colours throughout the poem create minor surges in the poetic energy.

Generally, I prefer to use basic colours. In 'The Museum of Natural History' the ball the child is bouncing, and rolling is simply 'red', not scarlet or ruby. I would rather

embellish a simple colour by creating compound adjectives, which associate the colour of the object with something dissimilar. For instance, a gull's "moon-yellow" legs in 'Boy Naturalist' or the "yellow-as-a-lemon-rind throat" of a meadowlark in 'Meadowlark'. "Cherry-red" appears twice in the collection, first to describe a macaw/feather boa ('Creation') and later to describe a plastic bird feeder ('Virga'). The recurrence of basic colours throughout the collection also creates a pattern through which unlike things are affiliated (Appendix XVI).

ACCRETION AND ACCUMULATION

The anxiety of the Anthropocene is one of exponential increase and excesses. It is one of growing populations, mass production, increasing waste and pollution, and rising temperatures and sea levels. The anxiety comes from an understanding that it is global and that there is no refuge from its effects. Because climate change is strongly associated with global capitalism, ideas of uninhibited economic growth and explosive technological progress are also Anthropocenic.¹⁵ Throughout my collection I explore the use of accretive and accumulative techniques which mimic these excesses and increases to produce anxiety and build tension.

I used descriptive accretion in the poems 'The Ghoul Box' and 'Splott Market' by creating lists of objects and observations which run on, one after another. The pace of these poems is restless. Images pile on top of each other, filling in the space with more and more. The descriptions spill across lines. The poems are flooded with material, heaped with fragments and vaguely associated contexts. They create an anxious and bewildered sense of excess, verging on panic. In the poem 'Leckwith' the place where the roses grow is described by a list of things surrounding it the rose bush. The list is short but runs on, unpunctuated, as if it is a heap of tangled objects,

I took you to where roses grow
sprouting through a ruined trolley, down

¹⁵ This has been explored extensively in recent years, examples include Ian Angus' *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* (2016) and Christophe Bonneuil's and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz's *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, in which they devote all of Chapter 10 to the discussion of "ecological degradation as a metabolic rift specific to the intrinsic logic of capitalism" (2016).

the road, among orchids lamb's ear
rubbish rubble rabbit bones.

Likewise, in 'Landscape with Bats', the setting "Along the Taff/at dusk" spills into a fragmented list of elements of the landscape, "bats, birds, hills" followed by another accretion of whimsical, fragmentary descriptions of the hills "violet hooves, smooth stone/gradients, loaves set aside to rise."

I also used line breaks as accumulative techniques. I often broke ideas, drew out sentences and ran them on to spill over the line. This way they accumulate meaning and additional context, creating tension against the desire for conclusion, nearly to the point of overwhelming. The poem 'Settlements' is an example;

Back then it was my job to mail checks
to people who were presumed victims
of exploitation and abuse
and had been
bullied and done wrong

by their too-big brand name bosses
or by the hospitals
where their babies were born
into poverty
or by the banks
which held the little money
they had.

I also used sound as an accumulative and accretive technique throughout the collection. The repetition of sounds can be both lulling and overwhelming. For example, in 'Liminal Taff' the repetition of the 'k', hard 'c', and 't' sounds makes this passage choppy and sharp—a river full of rocks and rapids, rather than a smoothly flowing river.

I am not alone
in stalking king—
—fishers along
these banks or easily
mistaking a bright
blue scrap of plastic
tangled and twisting
on a low limb for a bird
in flight.

With each additional sharp sound, the texture of this section becomes increasingly jagged. They accumulate into clusters of uneasiness. Sound has the potential to become cumbersome and overwhelming, and to turn from a novel pleasure to an excess.

MUSICALITY, SOUND, AND CADENCE

Musicality played a significant role in establishing a sense of connection and coherence in my poetry and was a method of generating and disrupting flows of energy. Alliterative patterns, assonance, and consonance were particularly important and can be found throughout the poems in my collection. This example from ‘Myth of Descent’ illustrates how cadence stimulates energetic flow:

There is
the bottle and the sandpit,
the swollen tongue
protruding between
black gums. There is sickness,
a brown bat face-down, drowned
in an oilslick.

I favoured imperfect rhymes, as is evident in the example above, because they resist closure and leave the text slightly skewed, just ajar enough for unexpected meanings to edge in. Slant rhymes suspend the movement of the poem, momentarily arresting the momentum. They create a stutter in the sound. I made a general point of not aligning rhymes or imperfect rhymes at the line break. Instead, I often buried the rhyme by shifting it to the beginning of the next line or allowing it to occur in the middle of a line. I wanted specifically to avoid the satisfaction, validation, and pleasant energetic affect of rhyming line breaks.

The poem ‘Meadowlark’ is perhaps the most explicit example of my interest in sound, which became thematic in the poem. The bird in the poem is identified as a meadowlark in line eight, followed immediately by the desire to say the word aloud and repeat it. Rather than repeat the word, the poem instead repeats the sounds of the word. It whirls off into a playful exploration of the sounds that make up the word ‘meadowlark’ and the meanings that emerge by drawing in words with similar

sounds. The ‘k’ sound is repeated first, in ‘shake’ (which is also an imperfect rhyme with ‘shape’), then in ‘sake’, and ‘spoke’, which is rhymed imperfectly with ‘close’ to introduce a repetition of ‘l’ sounds in ‘metal’, ‘slow’, ‘reel’, and ‘kneel’ in the next line. Round ‘o’ and ‘w’ sounds also emerge. In writing this musical play I wanted to use active, lively words, which appropriately conveyed the vital power of the vibrant bird I had seen. The poem’s narrator is carried away by the sounds emerging out of the bird and its name. She is drawn into a kind of musical reverie, dancing through a series of images which all seem to belong to the bird. At the end she returns to the present moment, watching the foraging bird, which has become “the soul/out searching the deepest ruts for something”, transformed by the sound. The spell of the music of language carries to the very end with the final line, “small to swallow down”.

The following example, from the poem ‘Crawlspace’ illustrates how the use of imperfect rhyme and alliteration establish different musical measures:

Something stirs in stillness. Brown dust
lifts in the rafters
as puffballs blossom in long pastures.
Weight is shifted
in order to achieve balance. Impossible
acts. The scarred knee caps
of those who’ve slipped through
the narrow gap. These are
the two worlds
merging into one.

Many sounds repeat including the ‘s’ and ‘l’, throughout. The roundness of the ‘o’ and ‘w’ bounce through the section like an incantation. Imperfect rhymes include ‘dust’/‘puff’(balls), ‘rafters’/‘pastures’, lifts/shifted, acts/caps/gap. The spell of sound is broken midway with the awkward word ‘achieve’ which introduces a whole set of new and harsh sounds. It is a point of teetering, a misstep. The music is quickly re-established with a succession of similar sounds and near rhymes as well as repetitions of sounds in ‘achieve’ (‘knee’, ‘who’ve’, ‘these’). It breaks again at the end with the gerund ‘merging’ and its abrupt ‘g’, which tries (with partial success) to associate itself with the ‘-ing’ ending to the initial noun, ‘something’. This example from ‘Crawlspace’ demonstrates how sound can be used to build or disrupt energy.

SHIFTING TONES, VOICES, AND PERSPECTIVES

Throughout my collection, shifting tones and perspectives unsettle flows and patterns. Digressions, divergent threads, and altered contexts force the reader to adapt, to find their footing, and to reorient themselves.

Tone and voice are also used to create subtle confusion and contradiction. For instance, the tone of the poem 'Entropy' begins confidently, with statements of fact to establish a sense of authority. Although the statements are reasonable enough at the outset, they gradually become more conjectural as the logic becomes more difficult to follow. The first person singular is used abruptly at the end of the ninth stanza, following two simple and indisputable statements:

Industries collapse. Homes are lost in floods or to the bank.
I saw a pair of ducks sleeping in a tent just last week.

This non-sequitur exposes holes in the narrator's argument (and the poem is, after all, an argument). This leap into the absurd, this apparent rambling, destroys the authoritative objectivity with which the poem opened and creates a sense of dubiousness. The slow but constant digression makes the entire poem a confusion of possible misinformation and uncertain meaning.

'The Museum of Natural History' also explores shifts in voice throughout its entirety. The main body of the poem takes the form of blocks, defined by various overlapping and competing narratives: the text of a museum display, overheard conversations, private musings, vague impressions, and misunderstandings. The space of the gallery is represented in these blocks, which are followed by a run-on list of sponsors, which is, in turn, followed by a final poetic statement, a contemplative, self-reflective voice from beyond the gallery, considering the nature of form (and space). The shifts in tone and voice in this poem are definitive and demand that the reader enter, pass through, and inhabit various imaginative and textual spaces, and be confronted with many differing perspectives.

The poem 'The Caretaker' is another example of a poem in which I shifted perspective to disorient and unsettle meaning. The poem begins with several sections of simple description and then suddenly, at the end of section c.1, involves the reader, parenthetically, as a participant: "(We see him deep within the rushes/ with

his feet in a pool of water,/ hunting mealy white flies.)” It goes on to presume a shared reaction to what we (narrator and reader) are seeing:

Later, the bird will stand in a clean bowl of supplemental food
left by the caretaker and we will notice, for the first time,
his slender ankles banded with bangles
of blue and white, identifying him, and seeming somehow
a most significant image.

In the section which follows this excerpt, it is abruptly revealed that we are not present in the described environment but that we have instead been viewing a film. The final section continues the descriptive tone established in the beginning but then wanders off into poetic musing and metaphor.

LINE, SPACE, FORM, AND LENGTH

I experimented with different forms throughout my project including haiku and haibun, however I felt the formality was too difficult to place within the collection and instead chose to use the less restricted form of free verse. The form of the poem was most often determined by experiments in sound, the space necessary to convey the depth and detail of the image of the poem, and the potential for the creation and derangement of energetic flows.

Line endings built or disrupted energy and allowed it to either cascade downward or to be blocked. I often chose line endings based on sound with an interest in spillage from one line to the next, but I also ended lines to break syntax and to fragment ideas.

Lines containing complete sentences convey a sense of normalcy, assurance, and certainty. Unbroken syntax has a lulling effect. Breaking the line unsettles meaning. The poem ‘Entropy’ is a good example of how syntactically intact lines ending with full stops convey a sense of authority. These lines are solid and reliable which creates tension when the statements verge on the absurd or questionable. Conversely, I broke lines across stanzas in order to express a sense of rumination, as if the narrator’s thoughts are wandering, as in this example from the nostalgic poem, ‘Feasts & Blessings’:

deer among falling flame, the upmost limbs already

leafless and everything succumbing
to the withdrawing sun, thematically
umber, all serious and silent, with far-off ducks on the wing

Line endings were also key to developing the unique form of 'The Museum of Natural History'. The form suggests the lines be read both horizontally as well as vertically within their blocks. Some of these blocks, however blur into others, disorienting the meaning conveyed in each. Lines are forced to break in the middle of words by the enclosure of the form. In some instances, words are broken to read as one word to the end of the line, but to be completed as a different word on the next. For example, 'kinds' is broken meaningfully into 'kin'/'ds', 'great' is broken into 'gr'/'eat', 'many' is broken into 'man'/'y'.

Space was also an important consideration and, at times, the white space on the page is especially significant. For example in the poem 'Firm Biology', words are opened by occasional excessive spaces between letters. This encourages a stumbling, disturbed reading and also emulates the unfurling of fern frond. Some words become loosened by the space within them. Each letter may appear to be a leaf on the stem, unknitting or opening from within, under unseen pressure.

The following lines from 'Catfish' are meant to be read left to right, but the space in the middle creates two columns which correspond to either of the two bodies being compared (the girl's or the fish's):

so its thick, dripping tail	touches my ankles,
so its slick barbels	twitch to my waist,
so its empty grey eyes	gaze at eye-level,

Although the space between the lines implies distance and the physical separation of the two, the text draws them together to align the features of their bodies and brings them, literally, eye-to-eye. The contradiction between the difference suggested by the space and the similarity asserted by the text creates tension and opens the reader to the possibility of the likeness.

Likewise, the poem 'Burial Chamber' takes the shape of a burial chamber, with its solid and imposing capstone of text on top and columns of text supporting it on each side. In this case, the white space between the columns is not simply a void, but an area which the eye must traverse to fully understand the object as a whole. The

textual columns are not dense as the block at the top because they encourage movement, drawing it into the alluring emptiness in the centre.

‘Creation’ is another example of a poem in which I make use of the page in order to reinforce the meaning of the poem. The looseness of the text, sprawling across the page, is suggestive of a child’s loose and shabby construction of a papier-mâché ocelot. The text becomes slightly more regular towards the end of the poem as the context becomes clearer.

The poems I have discussed above are difficult, if not impossible to read aloud because their vision is dependent on space and form. None of the poems in my collection are written specifically to be read aloud. This presents a contradiction because their materiality on the page is crucial, they are anchored to the physical world, yet their energy and activity occurs intimately, in the reader’s imagination and affective response. We are denied the power of sensual transmission via the voice. This frustration of the voice is another means of conveying a sense of the powerlessness I associate with the Anthropocene: the idea of being trapped in a human world of words and ideas, helplessly denied an authentic, sensual experience.

In addition to using a variety of forms throughout the collection, I wrote poems of varied lengths to create greater diversity. The poems ‘Spring Psalms’ and ‘Opening the Door’ are the shortest in the collection and consist of only a few lines, while ‘Crawlspace’ and ‘Settlements’ span several pages. The variety of forms and lengths strengthens the metaphor of the collection as an ecology of diverse and interrelated entities with different qualities but comingled roles.

CONCLUSIONS AND POEM ENDINGS

Because of the weight and importance of the ecological and existential issues that inspired my collection, I regularly grappled with whether I should be more explicitly political in my poetry. My original inclination was to spell the trouble out and to end each poem with a clear and unmistakable message. I wanted to write powerful, profound endings like Rainer Maria Rilke’s marvelous “*Du mußt dein Leben*

ändern".¹⁶ However, my attempts at strong and forthright endings led to the poems suffering from sudden, stilted conclusions. I began to move away from an explicitly political message.

My collection is, at its core, a political expression, however I did not want overt politics to obscure the meanings I meant to convey. I have many close relatives in the United States who deny climate change and global warming. I believe that they are nonetheless prone to environmental melancholia as they witness the rural landscapes they inhabit being dramatically transformed by developers, corporate farming, and the construction of interstates. They are vulnerable to the apocalyptic dread that arises from predictions of prolonged, record-breaking droughts, vast, uncontrollable wildfires, and ultra-destructive hurricanes. Importantly, they also remain capable of being affected by a sense of wonder at the sight of flocks of migrating birds or a smooth green snake bathing in a birdbath on a hot day. Rather than moralize, I sought a way to communicate this shared experience which could be understood and agreed upon, regardless of political affiliation.

Considering the poetic image provided a solution for the problem of how to open my poems to possibility and to encourage the flow of their energies to continue after the poem concluded. By drawing the movement of the poem towards an uncertain final image, a double-meaning, or gesture, I discovered a way to remain negatively capable, to evade a sense of closure, and to leave the poems indefinite. 'Dreaming in Edward Abbey Country' is an example of how I edited an ending in order to leave the poem inconclusive. A draft of the poem from September 2020 concluded with this image:

and from the mountain came a tanker trailing black
followed by a trailer stacked with chickens in cages
their hundred eyes and a storm of white
feathers flying like every angel had fallen out of heaven

In the final version of the poem the oil tanker remains, however the concluding image pulls the eye away from the highway and out toward the horizon, the desert,

¹⁶ The literal translation from the German is "you must change your life." This is Rilke's conclusion to his ekphrastic encounter with a headless sculpture in the poem 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' (Rilke, 2000).

and the motion of a bird circling in the sky. It is so distant that it is identified only as a shadow:

you can sometimes catch a glimpse of some
sleek shadow circling way off at the
horizon, winding down, and down
and ever on, downward, as if
attempting to extend
an invitation.

The downward motion of the bird, not coming to rest but continuing to descend, and the idea it brings to the narrator's mind of an invitation, leaves the poem mysteriously ambiguous. This conclusion also links the poem to the poem 'Birdwatching' which ends with the inverse image of a bird ascending, climbing and climbing. It also hints towards the vulture in 'The Museum of Natural History' who the narrator asks, "how should I know you?"

Embodying Ecology: Concepts and Themes

THE CONCEPT OF ECOLOGY AND SELF-ORGANISATION

Early in my project, when I became determined to write ecopoetry rather than nature poetry, I developed an ambitious, elaborate, and strategic plan. I conceived of my collection as primarily acting on two levels. The first was as an ecology created through a sequence of thematically and formally interrelated poems. The second level was elegiac but resisting solace.¹⁷ It would create a means of conveying the sorrow I experienced as I became more aware of what is threatened by the environmental crisis. The collection would capture the state of nature today and record it for posterity. It would be dedicated to my young niece Evelyn, who was just four years old when I began the project. My poetry would be written under the assumption that, if current environmental trends continue, much of the natural world as we know it will be irreparably lost by the time Evelyn has reached adulthood.

To this end, I proposed a collection that was divided into

¹⁷ Jeffrey Thomson (2002) writes that "the elegy traditionally moves from grief to reconciliation, from loss to consolation" however that "in the twentieth century, an age of skepticism and science, such consolation is perilously false" (p. 153).

eight thematically distinct but linked sections, representing various human and non-human forces in nature, taken together [to] form a kind of poetic ecosystem. The connecting themes will include the entanglement of history, place, and identity; ignorance and understanding; explosive growth and consequent loss; and the interplay between flora, fauna, natural disaster, and the individual and societal human. (Appendix I)

To evoke an ecosystem, I developed a formal structure and plotted each of the eight sections. In the first weeks, I defined and refined the parameters of each of these sections, approaching the arrangement and classification of the collection as a taxonomist might. I drafted a document outlining the thematic and poetic style I would employ in each section. I assigned myself tasks and began to create a list of research topics, ideas for poems, and a reading list of relevant poetry (Appendix II). The eight sections I developed were titled: Field, Beach (/Coast), Burn, Observe, Preserve, Stacks, Works, Evelyn.

Different forms and invocations would be used in each section. For example, I would focus on rhyme and meter in the first three sections, formally and thematically alluding to traditional Romantic verse and the pastoral. The second set of three sections would use modernist techniques and experimental forms. The poems in the section titled 'Observe', for instance, would be written as ethnographic field notes and would use anthropological jargon and scientific language. The final sections would include prose and free verse poems as well epistolary poems.

I began to plan extensive travel and research—an immersive experience of poetic documentation, much like Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*. My poetry would take me from British fracking sites and steel works to rural fields and remote coastal villages most threatened by climate change and rising sea levels. I would apply myself to archives, studying natural histories and historians. From the pages of rare books, I would draw insights into the experiences of the naturalists who had the privilege of being the first (westerners) to encounter and document various species of flora and fauna in the New World—the perfect wonder of discovery.

The project followed this path for several months. On one outing, I visited the Cardiff Bay Barrage, photographed it, researched it, and began to draft a poem (Appendix XI). I walked local beaches and wrote about the waste I found washed ashore, as well as the creatures I encountered. For each poem I drafted, I spent hours identifying symbolic potential and words which might create links to other poems.

This approach to writing the collection shunned intuition and sentiment in favor of an objective and scientific approach. Sorrow and melancholy would be embedded in the context of the collection, rather than expressed affectively in the poems themselves.

It was not long before the collection began to evolve away from this formal structure. This method of research and writing was exhausting, stifling, and I felt myself worryingly distanced from my own, embodied experiences of nature. As I continued to study environmental melancholia, I became increasingly convinced of the importance of affect and emotion in ecopoetry. Regularly, the poems I was compelled to write had no place within the strict template I had designed. My intuition was to write about the things I knew and had experienced; about catfish, flooded creeks, and birdwatching in cemeteries, not fracking or the science of coastal erosion. Memory had no place within the structure I had designed, but memory is fundamental to the frame through which we understand our relationship with the natural world.

When I eventually abandoned my original project plan, I carried several poems into the new collection with very little alteration. The inclusion of these early poems, written from that early perspective, became important to the final composition of the collection, as they represent the evolution of my process and methods. For example, the poem 'Boy Naturalist' was written as part of the 'Stacks' section and was drawn directly from a single sentence in a biography of the naturalist Sir Hans Sloane who helped develop the natural history collection at the British Museum.¹⁸ Likewise, the poem 'Kindred' was an original part of the pastoral-inspired section 'Field'. The form and feel of both changed little, even as the context of the collection shifted dramatically.

My oversimplified misconception of ecology as a science which can be emulated through clear organisation confounded my process. I had designed an instruction manual with templates and prescription. As I began to better understand the science of ecology, I found myself stimulated by a different, more chaotic kind of ecopoetics.

¹⁸ "...he noticed how the sea-mews laid their eggs on the ground, so thickly that he had difficulty in walking without treading on them, while the birds screamed overhead" (St. John Brooks, 1954, p. 35).

Ecology is expansively complex and intricate, which is what makes the disclosures of its relationships wondrous and surprising.

In his discussion of Heideggerian ecophilosophy, Greg Gerrard (2011) asserts that

responsible humans have an implicit duty to let things disclose themselves in their own inimitable way, rather than forcing them into meanings and identities that suit their own instrumental values. (p. 34)

My collection took on a different form and feel as I began to accept the disclosures I encountered as more authentically ecological than my strategic outline. Exploring concepts of chaotic dynamic systems, and energy flows in ecology allowed me to abandon my strict sense of organisation without feeling that I had failed at my original plan to express ecological enmeshment.

I invited my intuition to drive the project forward, waiting to see what it alighted upon, and I found that the poems and the overall collection began to establish their own logic of relation. When I relinquished control, my poetry took on a life of its own. I became responsive to the intuitive flows and the pressures of outside influences upon my poetry. I allowed myself to become Stewart's "point of impact" which is not entrenched but free-floating, a *part* of a dynamic milieu.

'The Museum of Natural History' is evidence of my increased receptiveness to intuition. Although I attempted to steer the poem at points by introducing new ideas, the final form of the poem emerged out of my receptiveness to the world's disclosures. Initially titled 'no tiger', 'The Museum of Natural History' was written as part of the 'Preserve' section of my collection and is one of the most dramatic demonstrations of my evolving process over the course of my project. The first draft of the poem was inspired by a trip to Bristol Museum and Art Gallery in early 2019. In the natural history gallery I encountered a small child playing obliviously on the floor before an exhibition of a large taxidermized tiger. The tiger was posed as if poised to attack. I quickly photographed the moment on my mobile phone (Appendix III). This photograph became the initial source of inspiration for the poem. In the first draft, the tiger was the focal point (Appendix IV) however in a subsequent draft, the child became the focus which is reflected in a change of title (Appendix V). Deeply unsatisfied with the poem's failure to convey what it was I had encountered, I returned to the museum on several other occasions. I began making notes and taking time to

walk slowly through the gallery space, to sit and listen, and observe. The final poem makes space and form a significant concern and situates both the tiger and the child on the page. It explores more intricately and implicitly topics of form as a function of space. It also engaged with ideas of territory, habitat, and extinction. In a sense the final poem became about the making and unmaking of realities. It includes the original impressions from the first trip and from the photograph, as well as fragments of conversation, text, and ideas encountered on later visits. The disclosures of the space and forms allowed me to write a poem which expressed, in a very unexpected way, the complexity of the original experience and all the additional context created on subsequent trips. My engagement with mediation encouraged me to compose the final poem in a much more self-reflexive way, which opened it to experiments in voice and tone as well as form.

William Stafford (1997) wrote of his process

at times, without my insisting on it, my writings become coherent; the successive elements that occur to me are clearly related. They lead by themselves to new connections... the indulgences of my impulses will bring recurrent patterns and meanings again. (p. 2)

As I dissolved the borders and abandoned the rules I had established for my collection, I found the poems beginning a process of thematic self-organization. I identified three specific recurrent frames through which my experience of the Anthropocenic world expressed itself. The first frame is my personal childhood which is associated with memory, myth, and identity. The second frame is mediation, which is also associated with identity, as well as discourse, and ideas of information and dislocation. The third frame is a state of dwelling and immediate and attentive experience. When viewed through the overall context of ecology, these frames become slippery, shifting, and multiplanar. Their distinctions, suggested by the three parts, are arbitrary. The influence of discourse is, of course, present throughout the collection and shapes the remembrance of childhood and beliefs about both the present and future. Likewise, the myths of childhood do not end in childhood but are alive in the daydreams and fantasies of adulthood as well. This self-reflexivity about organising and defining borders where none rightly exist hints at the eagerness of the human mind to create (or identify) order out of chaos. By creating parts within which

the poems relate in general but unreliable ways, I wanted to highlight the organic connection that the poems strive to make, beyond my own attempts at control.

Below I will discuss in greater detail the characteristics and themes which emerged in my collection and how I associated various poems within and across the three parts.

PART I: CHILDHOOD, MYTH, AND IMAGINATION

Towards the end of his life, Ted Hughes famously claimed, “my first six years shaped everything.” Yvonne Reddick (2017) writes that

The events of his childhood contribute to a foundational myth that lies behind much of Hughes’s poetry, and which provided the deepest impetus for his environmentalism: the idea of leaving behind a paradisaic age in an Edenic place, and the endless quest to return. (p. 57)

Like Hughes, who spent his childhood in rural Yorkshire, my poetry and general perceptions of the world are drawn from the rural landscapes of my youth. My imagination largely evolved outdoors, where environment, exploration, and mythmaking contributed greatly to my developing sense of self.

For Czeslaw Milosz the “great durability” of childhood perception is what makes a poet different from other people (Milosz, 1983, p. 41). Childhood is a period in which we are introduced to the values and axioms of our culture and must also learn to manage its contradictions. Not only do these contradictions exist between subjects within formal schooling (as Czeslaw suggests, between literature, history, and science) but also often between what we experience of the world and what we are taught to believe about it. The poet perhaps retains some trace of childish imagination and incredulity, which are often thoroughly depleted long before true adulthood.

For much of my childhood I lived in a small town in southwestern Wisconsin, about seventy-five miles from the shack in which Aldo Leopold wrote *A Sand Country Almanac* and about one-hundred-forty miles from the small town where Lorine Niedecker lived and wrote for most of her life. I grew up in a dynamic environment of blizzards and heatwaves, making myself at home up trees and exploring the

farmlands where my mother boarded her horses. When I was thirteen my family relocated to rural, central Texas. Because the environment of the Midwest was fundamental in my early experiences, the displacement and my struggle to adapt to the dramatically different climate and culture of Texas had a seismic impact on my sense of identity. Coinciding with our relocation, my parents, who had previously been active members of the Catholic church, stopped practicing their religion. For me the relocation had deep allegorical significance and was the literal expulsion from an Edenic paradise into the closest thing to Hell I could imagine.

The experience of the loss of familiar natural environments as well as spiritual support during my transition out of adolescence provided a source of inspiration for the poems in the first part of my collection. These poems are largely autobiographical and explore how natural environments become important characters in our personal narratives and the stories we tell of ourselves. In these poems, superstition, myth, and allusions to Christianity suggest the mingling of forms of belief and the construction of meaning through imagination.

Rather than warm or nostalgic representations of childhood, the poems in the first part of my collection offer a darker, more uneasy vision of youth. Already in childhood we are implicated in the destruction of environments. If overpopulation and the overconsumption of finite natural resources is a fundamental cause of the environmental crisis, every child poses a threat to the environment.¹⁹

Children represent one of several sources of spillage across the thematic partitions of my collection. The collection begins in the present tense, first-person with the poem 'Catfish', in which an adolescent girl is reluctantly compared to a large catfish. Like all of the poems in Part 1, 'Catfish' was inspired by a memory from my childhood. In subsequent poems, my child self is slowly decentred and becomes peripheral. I am the child who makes the ocelot in 'Creation' and the child who scars her knee and is flung to the hard earth in 'Crawlspaces'. In 'Nightshift', I am one of the father's sleeping girls. Throughout this section the child becomes less distinct, being lost in

¹⁹ Anne Whyte (1995) wrote, "simply stated, human populations are the prime cause of environmental stress...When we look at the 'environmental crisis', we see our own human reflection; our lifestyles, the existence of great wealth and great poverty, and our ever increasing numbers" (p. 41). Patrick Curry's (2012) bold discussion of overpopulation suggests it remains one of the most taboo and difficult environmental topics to raise and yet one of the most necessary.

other legends and myths. Children recur again and again throughout the collection. They are sometimes anonymous and sometimes famed. They populate the pages and form a pattern, creating continuity.

The small, golden-haired child in 'The Museum of Natural History' holds significant symbolic weight as the only living, active creature in the gallery outside of the blocks of text. The questioning children who appear suddenly in the final lines of the 'The Little Zoo' are also significant. Their abrupt presence shifts the context of the building anxiety. There is suddenly something to be answered for and it is the children to whom we must explain ourselves. The mother of the baby in 'Tupelo, Mississippi 1936' saves his life and tries to protect him from the nightmarish reality of a tornado's aftermath. The babies in 'Settlements' are born into poverty and in 'José the "young son"' of an undocumented immigrant lives in a single room with his mother and father. In the fantastical poem, 'Galveston, Remembered' my young nieces and nephews run away from home and learn to joyfully adapt to a world dramatically altered by climate change. There are many more instances of children throughout the collection. They sometimes carry a trace of the past but also always orient us towards the future (at times, a future which is now already the past, such as 'Tupelo, Mississippi 1936' and 'Boy Naturalist').

Children often appear in my collection in contexts in which they are made complicit. The announcement of the unborn child during a gender reveal ceremony in 'Sawmill' is meaningful in both the total innocence of the unborn baby and the destruction associated with its birth. Likewise, the figure of the young Hans Sloane carefully walking his way through clutches of eggs (also unborn offspring) represents a danger to the future. He is an antagonist. The children in 'Creation' innocently fabricate a rainforest out of plastics and other materials which are sources of devastating pollution.

Throughout my collection children act as an important symbolic strange attractors, points of transition "between stability and instability" from which emerges "a composite of all the dynamics generated by an unstable manifold" (Van Eenwyk, 1997, p. 178). They are a symbolic multiplicity, representing variously, innocence, ignorance, pride, perpetuation, renewal, hope, danger, over-population, doom, guilt, our future, our past. They are bifurcation points from which alternative meanings

arise to destabilize the system and “at which the system becomes headed for the brink: into chaos” (Van Eenwyk, 1997, p. 61). Through them we are able to transition into a second motion, the poem may pivot, depending on the forces and energies it generates. The repeated use of bifurcations throughout the collection increases the likelihood of chaotic and unpredictable affects, because successive bifurcations nudge the system further away from the clarity of predictable order and into chaos (Weissert, 1991). As recurring sources of both hope and anxiety, children offer a range of affective possibilities. They create chaotic potential while simultaneously offering thematic consistency.

PART 2: MEDIATION AND INFORMATION

A second thematic frame emerged out of my interrogation and increasing awareness of mediated discourses of nature, environmental crisis, and the Anthropocene. Several of my poems were inspired by events far removed, both spatially and temporally, from my local and immediate environment. The idea of the distanced and mediated experience of nature became a key thematic interest.

McMurry (2014) suggests that the media engenders “false conclusions” about the state of the environment. He asserts,

Media zooms us in close and give the illusion of mastery, but at the same time they distance us, making their subjects ever more peripheral to our quotidian frames. We see the Patagonian glaciers melting—so exotic, so remote—yet right alongside are the reporters and the scientists, documenting everything, apparently taking charge—we are reassured that something is being done. (p. 498)

Arran Stibbe (2012) makes an equally valid point about our distancing from authentic experience with nature and wildlife when she remarks that

Increasingly, interactions with animals happen at a remove: animals are mediated by nature programs, books, magazine, the Internet, or cartoons; framed by enclosures of zoos and aquariums; or exposed after death as exhibits in museums. (p. 1)

Stibbe argues that, beyond extinction, we are losing animals in the sense of becoming divorced from real-life experiences with and of animals, which are not framed or

mediated by cultural discourses. The real animal is replaced by a sign of the animal, which can “take on a life of its own in a simulated world” (Stibbe, 2012).

Rilke memorably wrote of a panther in a zoo in Paris which seemed exhausted and defeated, transformed from something powerful to something feeble by its captivity.²⁰ ‘The Little Zoo’ and ‘The Museum of Natural History’ both engage with the idea of animals removed from nature and ‘reinvented’ through mediation. In ‘The Little Zoo’ for example, the fantasy of nature and encounter with wildlife is shattered when we are shown the physical and mental trauma of macaques who have been taken from their natural habitat, subjected to medical experiments, and have subsequently been housed in a small zoo where their natural environments are simulated. By being removed from their habitat and being subject to human abuse they become humanlike. They look like babies and we presume their attitudes express shame. This is, of course, a projection. The macaques have been transformed into mirrors in which we view ourselves. We recognize ourselves in them and the shame we perceive is our own. It is a moment of terrible kinship mediated by the animals’ being made resources to exploit for technological development or to satisfy human curiosity. Other animals in the zoo are assimilated into the human simulation of the natural world too. They are also made kin through exploitation, such as “the tigers eating frozen blood/on a hot day” who occupy the same space as “the ice cream vendor” serving frozen treats to human visitors.

The animals in ‘The Museum of Natural History’ are subject to another degree of removal, as they are no longer living organisms. They are composed largely of synthetic materials upon which the remnants of organic animal matter are draped and are surrounded by artificial environments which mimic their habitats. Although the physical displays contain these stuffed remnants the displays in the poem are instead full of ideas, conversations, and interpretation. There are the forms of the animals behind glass but what ‘lives’ and is active in the gallery are the stories being told about them.

Technology is also an important mediator of discourses of nature and environment. Communications technology especially interested me because of its enormous reach and pervasive influence. I explore communications technology’s mediation of

²⁰ ‘Der Panther’ (‘The Panther’) (Rilke, 2000).

environmental narratives most directly in the poems ‘The Caretaker’ and ‘Sawmill’ which were both inspired by YouTube videos (Appendix VI and Appendix VIII).

The first several sections of ‘The Caretaker’ describe scenes of a man caring for a bird within a compound in a forested setting. By the third section the reader is acknowledged as a participant but specifically as a viewer, creating a sense of distance from the activity. It is soon made explicit that we are not observing the caretaker and bird in the present of the poem but are viewing a video of them from several decades ago:

2.a.

These four minutes and one second are all we have
of the last of the sparrows in this undated film; a faded reel at
least a few decades old. As these final five birds were all male,
hope for the species did not long outlast the 1980s.

Belief in the reality and presence of the scene is disturbed by it being made explicit that we are removed from the events in both time and space and that the birds, who seemed so lively at the outset of the poem, have been extinct for decades. The beginning of the poem is intentionally misleading in its sense of immediacy. Its topic is something hopelessly lost to the past. The poem engages with the idea of the mediated distortion of reality and confusion of personal experience and involvement.

In the poem ‘Sawmill’ I imaginatively describe a video of a wildfire being started by a gender reveal ceremony. I had experimented with writing about the Sawmill fire several times but found that writing directly in response to a YouTube video of the fire being started provided an interesting frame and structure. Like the event itself, my writing of the poem became both staged and unpredictable as I attempted to ‘experience’ the moment myself via the video. Some elements of the poem, such as “the buzz of fat black flies bumbling against a microphone” and the description of the sky are inspired by the video, while much of the poem speculates on the meaning of the ritual to the man and also the meaning of the ritual to the landscape. The fact that the event was filmed to be shared (spread) was also significant, as it inspired an underlying metaphor in which communications technology is as unpredictable as wildfire.

My first encounter with the Sawmill fire was through the television news. Contrary to expectation, environmental news often contributes more to a sense of confusion

than to clarity. We are left to wonder what to do with the weight of the information we have received. This aspect of global media is strikingly Anthropocenic in its deranging of scales. It often asks that we invest more (emotionally and financially) in the conservation of exotic animals and distant rainforests than the native wildlife directly endangered by our daily habits and lifestyles, or the woodlands destroyed to build new motorways or luxury flats in our own backyards.²¹

News has mythical, narrative qualities. It can create folk devils or tell Cinderella stories. It can also play a large part in establishing or confirming cultural values. As S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne (1997) note, “consuming the news has been compared to religion, ritual activity, celebration, and play” (p. 336).

The poem ‘To Be Wild and Fear Fire’ also engages with news mediation and mythmaking. It was inspired by news reports about wild animals displaced by wildfires in the American west in 2018 and 2019. In writing this poem I was critical of how media stories encourage the imagination to create elaborately detailed and meaningful narratives. Much of the imagery in the poem is drawn from news report, photographs, or Tweets about the wildfires, and is dramatic and emotive, encouraging us to see the behaviours of the wild animals as humanlike. In the poem the language is suggestive. The word ‘refugees’ hints at larger issues of displacement and political asylum. Likewise, the term ‘evacuation zone’ is a way of temporarily redefining a territory and those who reside within it as being in immediate danger. It implies boundaries established by human beings, who pack their possessions and leave the land, but excludes the wild inhabitants who are only negligibly safer outside of these zones.

PART 3: EXPERIENCE AND ENGAGEMENT

The third frame, which is primarily represented in Part 3 of my collection, is immediate experience. Most of these poems are lyrics inspired by events, experiences, and observations in recent years. ‘Galveston, Remembered’ is an

²¹ In 1965 Johann Galtung and Mari Ruge published a taxonomy of news values, which included proximity as an important factor in newsworthiness. However, in consideration of modern global digital media, Tony Harcup and Deirdre O’Neill (2017) did not include proximity on their revised list of news values, but added such factors as shareability, magnitude, and news organisation’s agenda.

exception. It was written to be the final poem in the collection as I originally conceived of it. I retained the poem as a remnant, a slightly awkward and out-of-place vestige of an early idea.

Overall, Part 3 represents a more balanced, negatively capable outlook on environmental crisis and an eagerness to engage with the natural world without either turning away from or fixating on the horrors of climate change. It offers possible solutions, such as a need for “throwing/ open/ the windows,/ the doors” in ‘Dispossession’, suggesting that, by letting out what’s trapped inside and letting in what’s banished outside, we might symbolically exorcise our demons.

In these poems many of the previous themes converge including the desire to derive cultural narratives and spiritual meaning from nature, and to create myths. These poems are a return to the childhood wonder with an additional understanding of the discourses and ideologies which have led to ruptures between human culture and the biosphere.

This group of poems also contains a series of driving poems, several of which explicitly mention the act of driving a car. ‘Arizona in Winter’, ‘Dreaming in Edward Abbey Country’ and ‘Virga’ were all inspired by long-distance road trips through the American Southwest over the past decade. These road trip poems hint at the ideas of Westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, and also embody a feeling of being cut loose from a sense of home and identity, of a drifting in dislocation and disorientation. Driving creates a unique experience of detachment from environment and place while also feeling intensely attuned to and engaged with it. It is both a broadening experience and a narrowing experience and one which represents the trouble of the Anthropocene on several levels.

Farrier (2019) discusses how Seamus Heaney’s driving poems, “embroil the lyric now in a curious mix of the ‘instantaneous time’ of motorized travel and the deep timescales of fossil fuel formation and consumption that attend it...” (p. 20). He goes on to suggest that “participating in petroculture is a deeply affective, sensual experience” (p. 44) and that, for Heaney, driving poems act as “points of entry to a sense of displacement or disorientation...” (p. 47).

The irony of experiencing remote areas of natural beauty via polluting, petrochemical transportation was an important opportunity for conveying the

contradictions of the Anthropocene and my personal implication in it, just as Robert Hass implicated himself in his poem ‘The State of the Planet’. The mobility of driving opens the world to the driver while simultaneously closing her off from it, creating a physical barrier between the driver and the outside. The landscape passes swiftly beyond the window. Driving is a glancing experience, not an immersive one, and yet the long-distance road trip is a deep and meaningful event.

Instances of driving can be found across the collection. Again, in an effort to bleed meaning and boundaries across poems and throughout sections, I favoured the word ‘drive’ over ‘desire’ in the poem ‘Pitch’ and elsewhere I refer to animals being “driven out.” In ‘Myth of Descent’ “Fear drives us/ deeper into ourselves”.

Driving also provided one of several methods of interrogating the ideas of place and the local in the third part of my collection. John Kinsella’s concept of international regionalism proposes that regional identity is best understood by being part of a global community, where contrasts lend definition. A variety of distinct regions, environments, and cultures are represented throughout my collection. These include places I have only passed through, as well as places where I have lived including Wisconsin, Texas, North Florida, Washington state, and Wales.

Although place is important throughout much of my poetry, I treated with it most directly and deliberately in Part 3. For example, the title of the poem ‘Dreaming in Edward Abbey Country’ ironically insinuates that the landscape is defined by its association with the writer Edward Abbey.²² I gave the poem this title to draw attention to a tendency to privilege the cultural over the environmental, even in a place culturally defined by its landscape (in this case, Arches National Park). It describes a place defined by buttes, sage, and antelope as well as one defined by tourists, petroglyphs, literature, and oil extraction.

Similarly, the title ‘At Tinkinswood’ alludes to a landscape defined by a cultural artifact. Although the poem is set at an ancient monolith in a “Welsh field” the action of the poem takes place largely in the narrator’s imagination. The landscape receives little description and is set apart, enjambed, and fragmented:

landscape with powerlines, nearly raining,

²² This also hints at mediation and the impact of cultural narrative on our conception of environments.

cattle grazing, nearby
transmission towers.

As a counterpoint to the driving poems, several of the poems in the final section are walking poems. During a period of the project, I took frequent long walks into the Welsh countryside, often to explore megaliths or other prehistoric sites. ‘At Tinkinswood’ and ‘Burial Chamber’ were inspired by such walks out of the city and into the countryside.

A.R. Ammon’s poem ‘Corsons Inlet’ begins “I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning” and later continues:

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,/from the
perpendiculars,/straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds/of thought/into the hues,
shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends/of sight: I allow myself eddies of
meaning:/yield to a direction of significance

(Ammons, 2007, pp. 99-100)

Walking through rural and urban landscapes has an equally freeing effect on me. I am often most receptive to the environment and feel most embodied while walking. Throughout my project, walking provided a unique creative context in which my physical movement encouraged my mental flow and creative process. ‘The Sleepwalkers’, ‘Air Quality Report’, ‘Liminal Taff’, ‘Landscape with Bats’, ‘Holy Land’ and ‘Firm Biology’ were all inspired by walks.

The poem ‘Splott Market’ is an exceptional case of a distracted walking poem. It was originally drafted on my mobile phone while I walked home from a flea market and has been edited very little from the first draft (Appendix X). As I traversed Cardiff on foot, crossing through industrial parks, passing down urban alleys and into city parks, I felt oddly embodied, though mentally distracted. As I walked, I processed my impressions of the flea market. They found form as I moved through the city, pausing at traffic lights as cars passed, hesitating under a tree to focus on typing a particularly demanding sequence of words. My physical passage was reflected in the progression of the poem. I found that as I moved further from the market my thoughts began to diverge and drift intuitively. The poem concludes with reference to “the waste of an atom” in the flow of the river. It is an allusion to Aldo Leopold’s essay ‘Odyssey’, in which an atom embarks on an odyssey through a prairie, through soil, into root, leaves, into bones and feathers, and so on until it reaches the sea

(Leopold, 2013). The remembrance of Leopold's atom arose unexpectedly as I walked. It was inspired by my distracted awareness of my own physical odyssey through the city and the odyssey of my thoughts as I considered the variety of objects I had encountered at the market and their impressions.

In *Poetry as Ecology* John Burnside (2006) provocatively asks,

How can we study the relations between things if we flash past them in a motorized non-time, distracted by our mobile phone, our car radio, or cut off from scent and sound and feel of them by a windscreen? (p. 97)

Burnside poses this question rhetorically but seeking an answer is an important aspect of representing the tension between human beings and the environment in the technologically mediated Anthropocene. The unique process of writing 'Sploot Market' on a mobile device while walking made me feel firmly situated in the world of the poem and its emotion, disembodied yet attuned to the outside world in the most innate and physical way. I was distracted yet still capable of navigating through the physical environment. I remained receptive to its cues although immersed in the idea of the poem. Through this unique process I feel I was able to map and layer seemingly distinct experiences, the market and the city, the movement of body and thought, the impressions of the present and the influences of the past.

I would argue that these flashing-past, distracted experiences represent a legitimate, if arguably problematic form of relation between human beings and their surroundings, which is being forged in our time. Rather than outright dismissing this particular form of experience, I chose to explore it, as I believe distraction is increasingly a primary experience for many human beings.

THEMATIC AND STRUCTURAL IMPACTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC OF 2020

Much of my collection was written or edited at various points during the global Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. The pandemic influenced my process in several ways. Perhaps the most obvious impact is that it made it impossible for me to travel except on foot. I do not own a car and did not own a bicycle at the time. I relied entirely on public transportation for long-distance travel. Enforced lockdowns led to

a more thorough consideration of the importance of the local and its relationship with the global. It created a very real sense of being disconnected from the global environment and made me profoundly aware of my local region.

During the summer of 2020, when the British government established a five-mile limit on travel, I began to actively map that distance from my home in Cardiff by walking towards the limit in different directions. I began to conceive of this Welsh city and the surrounding landscape as a territory with clear borders and I became especially interested in the prehistoric sites within its boundary, which inspired several poems.

Turning to global telecommunications technology in order to understand what was happening also clearly contributed to my critical awareness of mediated news of crisis and the sensation of being at a distance from events while simultaneously embedded in them. Stories about nature's return to essentially abandoned cities seemed to warm hearts across the globe. Yet, there was something terrifying about what these stories suggested and as the term "doom scroll" entered the vocabulary, the pandemic made the influence of telecommunications technology and its power to overwhelm, create discourses, and change behaviours, ever clearer.

On reflection, what was most significant about the pandemic, and what had the greatest impact on my writing, was the way it gave proof of the precariousness of modern, global civilization. The virus' ability to disrupt world trade and travel, to effectively change the way human beings live on the planet, essentially overnight, was one of the most dramatic demonstrations imaginable of the fragility of the dream-reality of the Western world, which lives in denial of imminent, catastrophic collapse. It made many believe, at least for a time, that an apocalyptic end to the world, as we know it, was not only possible, but evident. On the other hand, it also seemed to prove how manageable dramatic global change actually is, when it is judged necessary.

Only two poems in my collection directly engage with events of the pandemic. 'The Gulls' was written in response to greater numbers of gulls moving into my neighbourhood during lockdown, ostensibly as a result of a lack of food waste in town centres and on seaside boardwalks. I wrote the poem as if it was a legend to be passed down to generations. 'Adagio' is a breathless poem which explores the

concepts of contagion (viral organisms and ideologies), destruction, and overwhelm. It suggests an inability to breathe caused by smoke inhalation, by respiratory disease (such as Covid19), and by anxiety. It locates the pandemic in an historical web of loss and distress, which includes war and the destruction of rain forests.

The pandemic had particular relevance to my work because of the anxiety and uncertainty it caused and the foreboding sense of dread I was already exploring in the context of impending ecological and societal collapse.

Chaos and the Process of Assemblage

EMERGENCE AND PATTERNING

Chaos is a state of unpredictability. In the flux and nonlinear movement away from equilibrium, new matter emerges. When I first began writing poems inspired by my childhood, I did not intentionally choose to write lifeless animals into so many of my poems and I would not have predicted it. When I noticed this emerging pattern and my tendency to return to vague images of animal death, I realized that it was an important symbol to me. As a child, all animals were a fascination, and I was especially curious about dead animals. They offered the opportunity to approach shy and elusive animals and to study them closely. They caused a mingling of intrigue and sorrow. When I became aware of my inclination towards imagery of non-living animals in childhood memories, I discovered how continual encounters with the corpses of animals throughout the collection created uneasiness. One dead creature says something. But many dead creatures across many pages and in various contexts alludes to something more sinister and troubling. In this way, one set of meanings emerged repeatedly, creating a cluster with new characteristics, new emergent implications. The image of dead animals recurred and became a significant trend. It hints at the alarming decline of biodiversity on the planet and the ongoing sixth mass-extinction²³ while also encouraging a morbid mingling of intrigue and sorrow. Music is another emergent theme. In 'Nightshift' the song on the radio disrupts the quiet and facilitates the working and dreaming of the labourers. There is also music

²³ Suggested in Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014).

in ‘Adagio’²⁴ in which the composer Albioni is mentioned. The poem ‘Tupelo, Mississippi 1936’ ends with the intimation of a song. Elsewhere there are mentions of birdsong, hip-hop, and a song that seems to arise from floods and crawlspaces.

Another example is the recurrence of dawn within my collection. It is towards dawn that the father in ‘Nightshift’ labours, and it is the dawn which “the whole world awaits” in ‘Sister.’ It is also dawn when the dead thrush is discovered in ‘Dispossession’ and when the “vengeful Pork-Lord” stalks the streets in ‘The Sleepwalkers’. In my collection dawn is both hopeful and terrifying. I recognized this pattern and chose to encourage the theme of the dawn to give a sense of day breaking again and again throughout the collection—the passage of time which brings with it new hopes and horrors. Each instance of dawn suggests something significant happening in the night which creates a sense of continuation as well as mystery.

In *Redstart: An Eco-poetics*, Forest Gander (2012) asks,

If our perceptual experience is mostly palimpsestic or endlessly juxtaposed and fragmented; if events rarely have discreet beginnings or endings but only layers, durations, and transitions; if natural processes are already altered by and responsive to human observation, how does poetry register the complex interdependency that draws us into a dialogue with the world? (p. 2)

The process of assemblage is one answer to Gander’s question. The association of images and sound, the distributions of energies, and the flux of intensities throughout my work define a poetic assemblage, which is active and affective. With the relation between parts always foremost in my mind but with an openness to my intuition, I allowed themes and relationships to emerge. Disclosure was more important than producing links or crafting specific meanings. Recognizing the appearance of patterns is an important aspect of the process of poetic assemblage.

Elements of the assemblage emerged through recurring themes, imagery, or sounds. These recurrences at times cascades or layered on top of other thematic recurrences. As Hayles (1991) writes, “...in the science of chaos, iteration and recursion are seen as ways to destabilize systems and make them yield unexpected conclusions” (p. 11).

²⁴ A musical term indicating a piece of music to be played slowly.

By being receptive to the patterns which emerged and assembled in my poetry, I was able to encourage a kind of chaotic cohesion.

ENERGY

Energy is essential to the conceptualization of chaos. Affect is also energetic, as is poetry. William Rueckert (1996) writes, “a poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow” (p. 108). According to Rueckert, this stored energy is released (or tapped) when the poem is read, taught, or when it becomes a source of critical discourse.²⁵ Charles Olson (2005) famously characterized a poem as “energy transferred from where the poet got it...by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader” (p. 40). In his celebrated essay ‘Projective Verse’ he discusses the energy created through *composition by field*, a process by which “one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception” (Olson, 2005, p. 41).

My concern with energy was related to creating affect as well as conveying the nature of complex, dynamic system, and states of chaos that characterise the Anthropocene. As I have discussed elsewhere in this essay, I used many methods to generate and dispel energy in my poems and throughout my collection. I did not want to only build energy but also to disrupt it and drain it, to create fluxes and resonances. I did not, as Ruckert does, conceive of poetic energy as comparable to fossil fuel, but rather like climactic energy, weather patterns both stable and unstable, increasingly extreme and often resulting in floods and droughts.

In my conceptualization of poetic energy it is not only the syllable and the line which effect energy but also ideas and encounters with the familiar and the unfamiliar. An unsettling image can be frightening and fear can be electric. A slowly paced poem creates friction against a quickly paced poem, another source of energy. A pattern disturbed creates noise in the energy field and leads to chaotic shifts. The energy flow established by recurring themes is disrupted by shifts in tone, variations in form, and multiple meanings. Unpredictability and chaos are sources of anxiety but they

²⁵ Bate (2001) suggests the sustainability of poetic energy when he claims, “Every time we read or discuss a poem, we are recycling its energy back into our cultural environment” (p. 247).

also open us to novelty and wonder. Through energy, I wanted to convey the Anthropocenic sense of being embedded in the unpredictable present and prone to unexpected moments of both terror and delight.

COMPOSITION/RECOMPOSITING

Denise Levertov (1997) describes *given* poems as poems which “[seem] to appear out of nowhere, complete or very nearly so, which are quickly written without conscious premeditations, taking the writer by surprise” (p. 7). As I have already discussed, several of my poems were ‘given’ poems, which required very little work to find their final forms. However, the majority of the poems were edited and recomposed repeatedly throughout my process. Identifying when a poem should be edited was essential in creating a dynamic collection in which individual poems responded to edits in other parts of the collection and also, occasionally, resisted them.

Each poem had a different level of susceptibility to the influence of my research or to shifts in energy resulting from changes elsewhere in the collection. As I wrote and revised the poems, I often imagined their material structures, their textures, densities, speeds, and unique vibrations. I imagined how the resonant energy traveling through the collection was either absorbed or reflected by each. For example, the poem ‘Boy Naturalist’ was written early in my project and has not changed significantly from its original draft. I imagine this poem as being very much like the stony coastal cliffs where it is set, which generally undergo change and erode very slowly. Because it was inspired by a specific recorded instance in history it was also more firmly established, thus I closed it from the active influence of the present to which I subjected many of my other poems. The poem ‘Arizona in Winter’, which exhibits much greater fluidity, also underwent minimal editing. Rather than having the compact and hard energy of ‘Boy Naturalist’ it is much more a mesh, through which energies permeate, but which does not lose its shape. ‘Arizona in Winter’ was more influential than it was influenced.

Conversely, the poem ‘The Caretaker’ was highly susceptible to the influence of outside energies and took on entirely different forms over the course of the project.

The original inspiration for the poem came from an article about the extinction of the dusky seaside sparrow. Early in my project I wanted my collection to include some engagement with the idea of extinction. Because the dusky seaside sparrow had been native to Florida, where I lived for six years, I felt a particular connection to it. The first draft of the poem, originally titled 'Kennedy Space Centre, Florida – 1972' (Appendix VII), was about the circumstances which led to the extinction of the bird. It related the development of the space program at Cape Canaveral which led to the building of highways and housing developments (loss of habitat) and the draining of swamps to control mosquito populations (loss of habitat/food source). Later, when my research turned towards a critical awareness of mediated narratives, I encountered a short video on YouTube which documents the failed efforts of conservationists to bring the birds back from the brink of extinction. I recognized the opportunity to rewrite the poem through the lens of mediation. The form of the new poem, the tone, and the self-reflexive shift in perception towards the end, circulated a very different energy from the original poem.

To varying degrees, all of the poems in the collection were analysed in the context of their potential to interact with the energies of the other poems. This is not to say that they were conformed to fit a particular energy signature. Some of the poems were left alone for the sake of the discordant energy they seemed to create, such as 'Pitch', 'Firm Biology', and 'Holy Land'. However, many of the poems underwent either minor and major recompositing to stir up images with greater energetic or affective potential.

Borrowing words or images from other poems in the collection created connections. Rather than attempting to work an image or idea into a poem, I often rewrote the poem entirely, adjusting towards the sense of the words, images, or ideas I wanted to include. When the theme of music emerged, I discovered an opportunity to highlight links and weave more threads together. For example, the poem 'Crawlspaces' was originally written as 'Escapade' (Appendix XII) and was inspired by memories of several places where my mother boarded her horses when I was a child. During one edit, I intuitively concluded the poem with an image of spiders dangling like windchimes in a crawlspace under a building, drumming their legs to the beat of a song (Appendix XIII). I was attracted to the image and its potential to reinforce an emerging musical theme. I began to recompose the poem, focusing on the image and

symbol of the crawlspace and on rhythm. The final composition ends with the imagery of the dangling spiders and the entire poem is also significantly more rhythmic than the original composition.

I also composed and edited around the emergent sub-theme of Elvis Presley. Elvis Presley appears once by name and twice without being named within the collection. He is first present as the voice on the radio in ‘Nightshift’ singing the lyrics to one of the few songs he is credited with writing, “I’m all shook up”. He is also the unnamed infant in ‘Tupelo, Mississippi 1936’ and later appears “in Blue” in the Oji, California section of ‘Birdwatching’. As a cultural icon of the late 1950s, Elvis is a thematic symbol of the Great Acceleration and the rise of popular media and mass consumption. He is also a tragic figure, being both a victim and a cause of his destruction. I specifically wrote his lyrics into ‘Nightshift’ in order to strengthen this theme and to evoke the associated tragic irony.

Another essential element of the composition of my collection was the weakening or severing of connections when necessary. For example, the collection originally included a poem called ‘The Curse’ (Appendix XIV) which was related to the poem ‘Origin’ through the idea of a curse. The poem strengthened the themes of myth and superstition. It also contained one of the strongest images of dead animals in the first section—a burial plot for pet mice, lizards, and birds uprooted when a willow tree is struck by lightning. The poem remained in the collection in various drafts and inspired the storytelling tone of several other poems. However, throughout the course of my project, I was unable to express the concept of the poem to my satisfaction. Eventually, I chose to abandon the poem and remove it from the collection.

In another instance, I drafted a poem called ‘The Song’ (Appendix XV) and worked on it for many months. It introduced the image and metaphor of a song which is produced by both artificial and organic elements in the environment—the combined noise of bees buzzing, the singing of birds, powerlines humming, the ringing of a church bell. As music became a more prominent theme, I became increasingly attached to the idea of the poem. However, I was unable to write a version of ‘The Song’ with which I was sufficiently happy and decided that removing it from the collection would have a greater energetic impact.

When I chose to exclude these poems from the final collection, it left a gap in meaning, which was unlikely to be appreciated by anyone but myself. I embraced the decision to remove these poems because elimination emulates a valid, ecological process. It reminded me of the bee orchid, *Ophrys apifera*, which evolved to mimic a female bee to encourage pollination, but which self-pollinates in the United Kingdom due to the absence (or possible local extinction) of receptive bees (The Wildlife Trusts, n.d.). The orchid's appearance is a remnant of a lost relationship. In the same way, when I removed these poems I severed connections, creating a void in which a full understanding or meaning becomes partial or too faint to grasp.

CONCLUSION

As a child I was fascinated by nature and collected animal and insect remains whenever I came across them. I kept these remnants in plastic bags in a metal ammunition box referred to by my family as *the ghoul box*. My poetry collection is named after the poem of the same title to suggest a similar fragmentary quality; a random gathering of what remnants have been found. It also expresses a sense of the macabre which I associate with the concept of the Anthropocene.

I was intrigued by the lives of the things I collected in the ghoul box as well as the mysterious circumstances of their deaths. Many of the objects in the box were victims of human activity. In the poem, the ghoul box contains the remains of creatures which have been struck by vehicles, trapped behind windowpanes, hunted by humans (as I later discovered of the squirrels' tails), or are the prey of domestic pets. I had begun to develop this understanding while I was still young, but I only drew any serious conclusions from it upon reflection, later in my adult life.

My poetry collection was compelled by a similar fascination with what mysteries can be discovered in the complex intertwined lives of plants, non-human animals, and human beings. During my project I have grown to understand a situation in which human activity is often responsible for the death, destruction, and disruptions I encounter in the natural world. The Anthropocene is a term that succinctly characterizes the relationship between human beings and the greater biosphere.

Throughout the course of my poetry project, I struggled to communicate the complexity of the world as I experienced it. Compelled by a confusion of grief, dismay, reverence, and fascination, I strove to express how the energy of the past circulates in the present to influence the future—how the energies of love and fear affiliate us with the material world and a world of stories and myths—how ideas and energy are transmitted and constantly pulsing through technology—how all of those energies assemble and organize themselves to disclose meanings that are far too intricate to articulate in any form other than poetry.

Melissa Tuckey writes,

A feeling of being overwhelmed by crisis sets in for those who are concerned about the fate of our communities, our oceans, our forests, and our planet. Only through imagination can we access the full extent of our grief, empathy, love, anger, and passion. Without it we are paralyzed. Poetry gives us access to difficult emotional landscapes and to the ferocity of hope. (Cardenas & Tuckey, 2018, p. 7)

Keats's negative capability was perhaps more useful than hopefulness in the writing of my collection. Through the process of drawing together images of the world into an assemblage, I demonstrate my belief in complexity and mystery, in enmeshment beyond comprehension, and my limited experience in a world of multitudes. Mourning is difficult work and there is much of it to do. There is also a great need for learning not to settle in a comfortable pocket of knowledge but to remain receptive to unpredictable possibilities and processes. The ecopoetics I have developed strive to express a perspective which takes into account the tragedies of the Anthropocene, to convey the affective energies of anxiety and confusion, and aim to imagine other meanings and ways of being.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

A version of my original project proposal and work plan, dated 29 December 2018.

Erika Smits

PhD Proposal: Nature, Ecopoetry, and Ecopoetics

9-12 month work plan

The proposed collection of poetry will address concepts of the connection and intertwining of systems, predominantly through the lens of human exploration, fetishization, exploitation, and destruction of the natural world. The poems engage with the ways humans have historically attempted to understand Nature, and the use of language (both scientific and poetic) to characterize and explain the relationship between the human and the non-human world.

Ecology is essentially a matter of connectedness. As one explores an ecology, patterns emerge and intricate interdependencies begin to appear with a cascading effect. An environment is a big, conspicuous collection comprised of a multitude of related processes. The proposed poetry collection will be divided into approximately eight thematically distinct but linked sections, representing various human and non-human forces in nature which, taken together, form a kind of poetic ecosystem. The connecting themes will include the entanglement of history, place, and identity; ignorance and understanding; explosive growth and consequent loss; and the interplay between flora, fauna, natural disaster, and the individual and societal human. The poems in the proposed collection will be inspired, in part, by research on relevant environmental and historical topics, for example, coastal ecology, the history of naturalism, extinction events, and the rise and decline of the coal industry and its communities.

My research will explore traditions in nature poetry and the emergence of environmental and ecopoetry, comparing contemporary nature poetry in which acknowledgement of the ecological crisis is glaringly absent and poetry in which eco-activism is focal. It will map shifting concerns and poetic approaches of poets such as Mary Oliver, Robert Hass, and John Kinsella to popular environmental science, eco-activism, extreme weather events and other consequences of human activity on climate change.

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APPENDIX II

By early 2019 I had outlined a project plan with eight sections and basic ideas for each. The document also includes comments and various other musings.

This collection of ecopoems is divided into eight sections. Trees are intentionally left unmentioned until the final poem, which is a dedication. The sections are meant to give a picture of the natural world using various methods from history to describe, appreciate, and understand nature and human impact on nature. Using data and the scientific method, and understanding the poetic tendency of the past to describe nature in non-scientific terms, the collection shows the complicated relationships between organisms and their environment. The poems in the final section will be passionate, attempting to describe the world as it is, even in its wasted state, to a child who will only know it as something worse.

Themes include fear of change (for better or for worse) and loss of home and language. A recurring idea is that obscurity and extinction of a species or a culture is a loss of identity and that things that have vanished cannot really be known and signal a final, deeper loss of understanding (of our world and ourselves).

Field (field/marsh?)

spend time in fields

Fields are as boring as they are dynamic. We take fields for granted but they harbour many secrets and tell many stories. They are an unappreciated and misunderstood landscape, and therefore more under threat from exploitation. These poems aim to appreciate the ecology of them and to understand why they exist.

Poetic Style

Undetermined - possibly imagism

Themes

Tasks

- Record observations in fields at various times of day using all senses.
- Make a list of words which can be used to describe fields.

Research Topics

- clear cutting
- ecology of meadows

- Ecology of swamps ?

Reading List

Other Poems mentioning fields

Ideas for poems

Beach

Spend time at beaches - what can be found at the beach?

Secluded beaches

Learn about tides

Write about what washes up after storms

Learn about coastal flooding

Visit places prone to flooding

Historic flooding patterns and climate change

Coastal flooding is a major concern of climate change and one which puts humans in the same sinking boat as many species who have suffered loss of habitat due to human-created climate change. The beach is a romantic and mysterious place and the sea washes up many treasures, but also much waste. The creatures we find on beaches are often dead or vulnerable. Beaches are the dying grounds for many animals and feasting grounds for others. What we find may be portents and reminders of the greater mystery and fragility of our world and how vast but deeply connected everything is. Beaches represent a kind of proof that the ocean is as blood circulating through the body a creature of which we are all a part. They represent the cusp of the safe and known and an ominous, dark unknown.

Poetic Style

Undetermined - possibly imagism

Themes

- loss of home/habitat (for humans & animals) / displacement
- economic loss
- unknowing and ignorance

Tasks

- Record observations of beaches (objects, animals, human behavior/different times of day)
- Create list of cities in danger of being lost to coastal flooding
- Create a list of words related to beaches and coasts
- Collect interesting human-objects on beaches
 - Record date and time found + tides at that time

Research Topics

- Tides

- Sea levels
- Coastal flooding and climate change
- Historic and prehistoric coastal flooding
- Beach ecology

Reading List

<https://www.preventionweb.net/english/professional/maps/v.php?id=7687>

Other Poems mentioning coasts or beaches

Ideas for poems

- slipper limpets (*DRAFTED*)
- beach resort

Burn

Learn about prescribed burns

Fire climax species

Forest fire stats

The destructive force of fire can, at times, create life. Fire represents knowledge and power, our advancement "beyond the animal world" as it is thought that controlling fire was a first step out of our animal past and towards human civilization. Yet, increased forest fires are considered to be one likely result of human-created climate change. There is a sense of a loss of control. The potential for mass displacement of populations of humans. The loss of fragile habitats for animals. If fire is power then, humankind's excessive love of power and an inability to wield it responsibly, can be represented in the horrific destructive force of raging forest fires, skies turned red, and air too thick with smoke to breathe.

Poetic Style

Undetermined - possibly imagism

Themes

- Destructiveness
- Fragility
- Controlling an uncontrollable force (human arrogance)
- Loss of home and habitat (both humans and animals)

Tasks

- Contact people who have lost homes due to fires
- List of terms related to fire

Research Topics

- Prescribed burns
- Fire Climax Species
- Forest Fire statistics - increases due to climate change

- Experiences of people who have lost homes to fires
- Fish and Wildlife displacement in fires
- Accounts of animals fleeing fire

Reading List

Other Poems mentioning fire

Ideas for poems

- Image of a coast on fire - gorse (habitat for many animals)
- Loss of homes to forest fires
- Red sky - Smoke from forest fires and air pollution

Observe

Use methods for calculating populations for conservation concerns?

Humans are given the animal treatment here. They are observed as if they were animals on the brink of extinction, with the same desperate need to know them and understand their behavior as much as possible before they have disappeared. They are observed in nature and engaging with nature, a perplexing and contradictory set of behaviours which would defy interpretation in any other species.

Poetic Style

Experimental - borrow from scientific method

Themes

-

Tasks

- Observe people interacting with museum collections
- Observe people in nature (field and beach)
- List of terms used to dispassionately describe animals for scientific research

Research Topics

- Conservation Methods for recording behaviours of species
- Data collection and analysis in ecology
- Scientific description

Reading List

Other Poems related to observing people

Ideas for poems

- description of human in nature gallery 1
- description of human in nature gallery 2
- description of human in nature 1
- description of human in nature 2

Preserve

Research extinct species (due to human activity)

Find museum collections with them

visit and describe them

For many species it is far too late. They are lost forever. We cannot fully understand what their loss means to the larger ecosystem or how far it's impacts are felt. We know that everything is connected, and how the balance must be adjusted to fill the space is not always easy to see. This section is a sombre list of just some of the dead, given soberly, and with an enormous sadness that can only be expressed through simplicity and silence.

Poetic Style

Undetermined

Themes

-

Tasks

- Make a list of museums with extinct species
- Select several animals to write about
- Contact museums and see if I can go behind the scenes with their collections

Research Topics

- Each extinct species on the list - how did it go extinct and when?
- Who officially declares a specific extinct
- What must be done to preserve the remains of precious, extinct species?
- How many species are currently thought extinct?

Reading List

Other Poems mentioning extinction

Ideas for poems

- description of extinct species 1
- description of extinct species 2
- description of extinct species 3

- description of extinct species 4

Stacks

Old naturalist books

Learn about old naturalists

Describe them

(Loss of language)

How can we know a thing we have never seen? How must our imaginations work to try to paint a picture from a description. What would the world look like if we only went on what we were told and not what we are able to experience with our own senses? What are we willing to believe about the world based on what we are told? Here is a history of attempts to share an unseeable world with others. The lesson is not simply that we cannot know, but that we must, while we can, see with our own eyes and feel with our senses, because that is the only way we can truly know what is happening in the world.

Poetic Style

Undetermined

Themes

- Loss of language
- Unknowing & ignorance

Tasks

- Make a list of libraries or museums with collections of illustrated natural history
- Contact Special Collections Libraries to look at texts and make notes

Research Topics

- Issues of accuracy and misunderstanding in natural description
- Early naturalism and naturalists
- Reactions to descriptions of new and unknown species
- Excessive Collection of Animals?

Reading List

Other Poems

Ideas for poems

- Poem about naturalist seeing animals for first time
- Poem about artist imagining animals
- Poem about public thinking about exotic animals
- Words for describing animals

Works

fracking?
steelworks in Port Talbot?

Why is climate changing? Carbon pollution, fracking - industry is warming the globe and destroying the fragile ecological balance. Some of these industries are deeply rooted in the past. Entire towns built around industries which have been slowly destroying their employees' health for generations, but are only recently being acknowledged as toxic on a larger scale. Yet, for these towns, being poisoned is better than losing their way of life. The industry is the beating heart of their home. If the industry dies, their heritage disappears into obscurity. Their fathers and grandfathers who toiled and gave their lives for the industries did so for nothing. So these industries, this heritage, must be protected. At any cost. And this too, is a kind of fear of extinction - the extinction of culture - a culture which many die to save.

Poetic Style

Undetermined

Themes

- Loss of identity
- Fear of change

Tasks

- Make a list of Industrial sites (coal mines, steel works, fracking site)
- Contact Sites for a tour and also explore the towns (go to a pub)
- Makes notes about what I see - people / culture

Research Topics

- Coal Industry in Wales - valleys
- Steel Works in Port Talbot
- Fracking in the UK
- Most polluted areas in UK

Reading List

Other Poems about industry/pollution

Ideas for poems

- Valleys - coal
- PT - steel
- Fracking

Evelyn

Letters to Evelyn

What she should know because it will be gone

The unnatural natural

This final section is addressed to my young niece, Evelyn who is currently four. At the current rate of climate change it is believed that much of the planet will be vastly different by the time she reaches adulthood. Civilization will change and Nature as we know it will be unrecognizable. I write this section for Evelyn, to capture this wasting world, to show her of things she will never experience herself. What the natural world is like now, imagining that it is beyond saving and in its dying breath. It is a world she will only know through words and pictures. This section is desperate and apologetic. It is broken hearted for itself and for her. It is a seed planted, in hopes it will grow in dedication to something lost forever.

Poetic Style

Undetermined

Themes

- Loss of language
- Unknowing & ignorance

Tasks

- Make a list of libraries or museums with collections of illustrated natural history
- Contact Special Collections Libraries to look at texts and make notes

Research Topics

- Issues of accuracy and misunderstanding in natural description
- Early naturalism and naturalists
- Reactions to descriptions of new and unknown species
- Excessive Collection of Animals?

Reading List

Other Poems

Ideas for poems

- Who I am is the tall storm (DRAFTED)
- Field
- Beach
- Burn
- Observe
- Preserve
- Stacks
- Works
- Dedication Tree

Dedication Tree - describe leaves and bark of several trees.

--release party each book has a match inside and a flint stop on back, paper infused with whatever burns green--

--seed paper in books--

Places to Visit:

Beach

Cwm yr Eglwys - West Wales ([link](#))

Preserve

Grande Galerie de l'Évolution - Paris ([mnhm.fr](#))

Observe

The Dead Zoo - Dublin ([museum.ie](#))

Works

Disused Colliery - South Wales ([link](#))

Steel Works - Port Talbot ([link](#))

Cuadrilla Fracking Site - Lancashire ([link](#))

Release party idea:

A large David Attenborough-sized glass jar is rolled out and David Attenborough emerges from it a la Marilyn Monroe from a birthday cake.

APPENDIX III

This photograph was taken in the natural history gallery at the Bristol Museum in early 2019 and inspired the poem which would eventually become 'The Museum of Natural History'



APPENDIX IV

In this early draft of the poem which would become 'The Museum of Natural History' from February 2019, the tiger in the photograph (Appendix III) was the primary focus.

no tiger

look at this white-eyed tiger
 looking out at us - looking
lost, out of its dusty glass
 eyes. looking,
dislocated, behind a dusty pane of glass,
 out of its lidless eyes.

the stalactites of its bone-yellow teeth
 hanging, set-bared:
an expression guaranteed -
 fearsome-fearful, in perpetuity.

It is not a tiger.
 has no tiger blood - no tiger heart to drive
 no tiger blood; no tell-tale tiger pulse.
 no hot tiger blood nor tiger breath.
 no heat in no tiger veins, no breath in no tiger lungs.

only milky glass where no tiger eyes
 are, looking beyond dusty pane of glass -
where blond-headed children in red sweaters,
 red boots, play games -

gazing, transfixed, nowhere;
 as if searching, between things,
for a locus.

APPENDIX V

By mid-2020 the poem 'no tiger' (Appendix IV) had been rewritten as 'A Child at Play in the Extinct and Endangered Animals Room'.

A CHILD AT PLAY IN THE EXTINCT AND ENDANGERED ANIMALS ROOM

When I enter the room and look
for the tiger I find instead a child
haloed in tiger-light, upon the floor,
a smile upon her face;

A child at play in the tiger-room,
the dodo-room, the room of the lost
or the lessening, upon the floor,
a smile upon her face.

At play, beneath the bulk, the husk of
a tiger, who had stalked in jungles
worlds away and stands decades beyond
death, with fangs set like sunbaked clay


his old stripes absorb the spotlight
and fade, the eyes an artists' work
No God had draped this skin upon
his brittle molding bones and stuffed the rest.

The child is delighted by the red ball
she rolls beneath the hulk of a beast
she does not seem to see, who stands
to speak of tragedies well beyond imagination.

APPENDIX VI

A four minute and one second long video titled Dusky Seaside Sparrow shows the habitat and care of the last extant dusky seaside sparrows. The poem 'The Caretaker' was inspired by this video. The video description provides context.


Kim Parker. (2016, Aug 5). Dusky Seaside Sparrow [Video]. YouTube.
<https://youtu.be/pUEM7buSYNw>



Dusky Seaside Sparrow

3,768 views · 5 Aug 2016

72 DISLIKE SHARE SAVE ...

 **Kim Parker**
206 subscribers

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This bird is now extinct.
One of the last few remaining birds and was looked after by Santa Fe College, Gainesville, Florida.

APPENDIX VII

An early draft of a poem inspired by the extinction of the dusky seaside sparrow.
Written in October 2019. It eventually became 'The Caretaker'.

Kennedy Space Centre, Florida – 1972

*"The decline & disappearance of the Dusky Seaside Sparrow
from Merritt Island, Florida"*

I.

A few sparrows left, in the hems of trees
or in the reed bed. Their black darting eyes-like-seeds are swift
to see. Their thin legs

clashed, they snap up

larva and nymph with sturdy beaks,
from stalks and leaves, then dive as if

wings are fins
and air is sea.

The salt marsh retreats.

The sparrows watch along the coast.

They listen to the quick beat
of mosquito wings.

II.

Across the dusky shades of space,
a rocket's thrust removes it. The ship

takes the sky, trails a feathered cloud.

The sparrows pursue it.

III.

Below, engines roll like waves and clashing

light shapes slide

along the newly paved highway.

Progress does not hesitate: Man has moved beyond
the Celestial gate.

IV.

As the ocean rocks, to and fro—

As the seaside swells

with exploration—

V.

And above, pin-pricked stars-like-barley

appear, blink and beckon. Space:
so precious and so perilous.

The Milky Way spreads

a gilt foredge

across the heavens, preparing

its revelations.

As the sparrows sleep,
the salt marsh retreats.

The birds will miss it.

APPENDIX VIII

A frame from a shortened version of the video of the Sawmill wildfire being started. It was posted to YouTube by a local news station in Tucson, Arizona. In this version of the video, one man is fully obscured by a black rectangle, while the arm of another man is momentarily visible. This image was reminiscent of the DiVinci's famous depiction of Adam in the Sistine Chaple, which encouraged the analogy used throughout the poem 'Sawmill'.


KGUN9. (2018, Nov 27). Sawmill Fire video Starts [Video]. YouTube.
<https://youtu.be/1xzJu9FI0rk>



APPENDIX IX

A screenshot from a longer version of the Sawmill wildfire video, posted on YouTube. It includes “A minute and 24 seconds, during which nothing substantial happens” which was cut from the original video I saw. In this video the human figures are completely obscured by black boxes.


Arizona Daily Star. (2018, Dec 7). Missing shots fired before gender reveal caused Sawmill fire [Video]. <https://youtu.be/n9YTVT0tZKI>



Missing shots fired before gender reveal caused Sawmill fire

15,478 views · 7 Dec 2018

51 DISLIKE SHARE DOWNLOAD SAVE ...

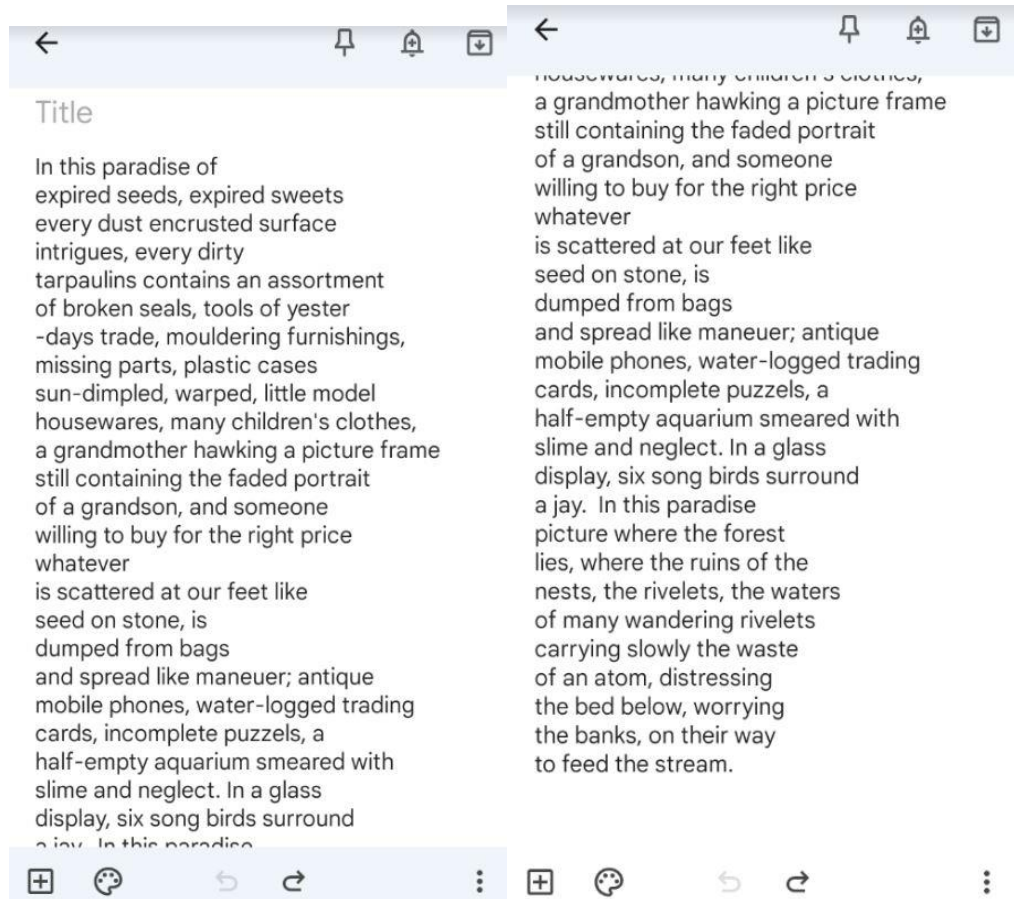
 **Arizona Daily Star** ✓
22.3K subscribers

Off-duty Border Patrol agent Dennis Dickey had several misses before his high-powered rifle blasted an explosive target in the Santa Rita Mountains to set off a 47,000-acre wildfire last year. A minute and 24 seconds, during which nothing substantial happens, was cut from the beginning of

www.youtube.com/watch?v=23zLefwiil4

APPENDIX X

The first draft of ‘Splott Market’ was written in Google Keep Notes on my Moto G(6) Play mobile device on 15 April 2021, while walking home from a flea market in Cardiff, Wales.



APPENDIX XI

Photographs of the Cardiff Barrage which were intended as inspiration for poems.



APPENDIX XII

An early draft of the poem 'Escapade' from August 2020, which was recomposed as the poem 'Crawlspace'.

Escapade

She was balancing on boards in the dark old barn
where stray light streamed through the moon-dusty
tack room in musty beams. A slip through a narrow
in-between and the fringed-feathered splintered wood
took the skin clean off both the front and back of her knee.

She unfolded the big bag of sugar cubes and took,
indiscriminately, two irregular lumps, mottled
with dirt and flaked hay, one for the bay
she'd been allowed to name after a song, and placed the other
directly into her own mouth to dissolve its sweet grit
slowly on her tongue.

In the pasture, she'd gone again
seeking small brown puffballs along barbed wire.
She admired their yielding nature, pushed with ritual
deliberation, attempting to witness the exact moment between
their rounding and undoing themselves in a whiff of sporey smoke.
It could only happen once for any one.

She cherished one precise fear of falling.
The only time her mother ever invited her to
ride with, she made the horse extend its canter and break
suddenly into a gallop. It only lasted a moment. Her
arms were too loose around her mother's waist. The space between
hoofbeats was like a caught breath. Her body recklessly
reflexed. She felt the world open itself
like a wound dealt in youth, beneath a fresh scab, a scar
already forming. Her memory was gouged
even deeper. The instant of weightless flight lasted
the long, perfect eternity
before landing.

APPENDIX XIII

A recomposed draft of the poem originally titled 'Escapade' (Appendix XII) from May 2021 with the new title 'Crawlspace'.

Crawlspace

A crawlspace
under every building
and above; the rotting rafters.
Puffballs popping up, out in long pastures.
 The stables and the barns. The narrow gaps
between things,
between two beams
of feathered wood.

 O World
of dust, fouled mud, dirt, must,
filth, film of grime, a fine grey
grit engrained in every
surface, follicles of hay,
even the sugar cubes
tucked inside a paper bag
within a metal bin
are dirty.

A young thing, eight or nine, tries
the beams but gravity grips
her slender limbs. She slips
through the narrow gap
and scrapes
and shreds the skin.

The horses shed
each Spring. Horsehair fixes
to tack, bits and leather bridles.
Horsehair rises through light
falling through gaps.
The horses (Chip, Sparky,
Escapade) buck and kick. The whip's tip
lashes their haunches. It is
sometimes bitter
to see. Some pain
will follow as the skin becomes
pulp, drawn up, revealing red
underskin of kneecap,
scabbing, with time producing
a scar which will keep

hurting. Tracking along the fence line
and riding only sometimes.
When she thinks 'extend' and
squeeze with her thighs, out fly
their legs, all four off the ground,
a hesitant rhythmic pounding. 'Extend' means
make more of this moment, means
changing time, changing tempo, now
weightless, now lengthy breathless
moments of pressure escaping through atmosphere before
the body is released from its senses and is flung,
and suspended for a long, long time
before a hard landing.

The goat named Tex begins to bleat. Morning
glories pop open around a junked car. They mark
the morning. The trees here are old as sin and might be
breaking under their own burdens. The gutters swim

with sunny yellow weeds. Past the stables
a woman stands with a long black whip,
in an arena and leads
her horses in circles
until they are broken.

O World
of blood, bruise, scab,
scratch, bite. O World through which
we rise and climb, are flung and fall.
There are many methods of descent.
Gravity insists
we be belly-low.

There is always
some narrow gap
between or below, some small space reserved
for those willing to crawl
into that place where the limitless
congresses of spiders
dangles loose like windchimes and
collectively drum
four free legs, which makes that sound
that everybody knows
by heart.

APPENDIX XIV

A draft of the poem 'The Curse' from late 2020, which was excluded from the final collection. It was originally intended to create and strengthen themes throughout the collection.

The Curse

Our house stood on high ground
 With a yard like an arboretum. The varied trees rose
 Like lures on the inverted surface of the sky,

 Baiting storms. A nearness to heaven
 Seemed to provoke misfortune and bad weather.
 They were plagued by lightning.

The first tree struck was a maple. It toppled intact,
 Turned up the thralls of its rain-loosened roots.
 On hands and knees, we ventured through
 Its grounded boughs, recovering relics:
 Greenstripped mapleworms and a ruined robin's nest.

Then an elm was struck by a bolt
 Which split the bark below one horizontal branch.
 We tried to stanch the weeping sap but
 In the swell and blossom of Spring, slowly
 The tree shrank and shed its last shrivelled leaves.

One tree fell then another; the willow then the oak,
 The sheltered burial plots of pet mice
 And baby birds upturned, the high-up
 Vantage points of childhood were lost,
 The shaded places vanished.

We tried only once to replant the desolated lot;
 Staked a red pine sapling out front,

But when the next storm drew over and a sudden
 Flash burst through our darkened rooms,
 We turned to the window

And looking out,

Saw the little tree aflame,
 Burning like a torch.

APPENDIX XV

A draft of the poem 'The Song' from early 2021, which was excluded from the final collection. It was originally intended to create and strengthen themes throughout the collection.

The Song

I.

An orchid blossom blooms from a heap
of ruin and casual waste,
in the shape of a prehistoric bee.

II.

Spoiled by the generosity of a flowery median, honey bees
arrive home, lemon-legged, to their hive within the walls
of a shuttered parish hall.

III.

Under the weight of ivy vines, of nesting mice, and the brief
added burden of a tit plucking moss,
the garden wall gives way and crumbles slowly,
stone by stone.

IV.

Day by day the dead drift further toward oblivion; orange and grey
lichen on their headstones
obscure names, dates of birth and death, erode
the carved cries of sentiment
to abated breath.

V.

Small birds singing on electric wires which hang above
and hum all across the city. Lifted over wastes and walls

and graves, resonating through each weary stone, the song
stops a while to roost with the worshipping bells
which toll still in the high steeple
of an ancient cathedral.

APPENDIX XVI

The recurrence of basic colour words throughout the collection.

	Uses	Reference
Red	3	Ball, bicycle light, rocks
Orange	3	Butterfly(species name), thrush, juice
Yellow	5	Meadowlark, weeds, legs/moon, papers, speech(pollen)
Green	8	River, light, boa(duct tape), (verdure), sky, gape(river), fingers(leaves), blood
Blue	15	Mist, plastic/kingfisher, sky, band, mural(sky), cloud, blankets, Elvis (ambiguous), indigo bunting, sky, mist, mist, (sky), corn, moon
Pink	4	Nail, nubs, rooftops, starfish
Brown	6	Dust, gape(river), bat, rooftops, sugar, slopes
Black	15	Ape, whip, fields, knobs, marble, bark (snake), gums, spiders(species name), Diamond(proper name), leaves, flies, box, thrush, meadowlark, market
Grey	6	Grit, eyes, weather, grace, morning, rain
White	15	(Snow), men, bodies(gulls)/froth, eyes/ghost, stripes, flies, band, sun, hound, petals, flame, sky/lake, bones, light, daisies/desert

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