

**‘A Continual Song Out of Merely Being Here’: Environment and Interiority in Some  
Contemporary British Poetry  
and  
*Natural Phenomena*  
(poetry collection)**

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**Thesis Title:** *'A Continual Song Out of Merely Being Here': Environment and Interiority in Some Contemporary British Poetry and Natural Phenomena* (poetry collection).

Rooted in reflective practice, this critical study uses a consideration of environment writing to open up and explore the concept of interiority. It argues, with particular recourse to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the 'chiasm', that the human individual experiences a porous reciprocity between her thought, perception and language and that of her social and physical environment, and that this has implications for any written presentation of 'nature' – a contested term that is explored via Timothy Morton's thinking about environmental aesthetics.

The study offers close readings of poems by Michael Haslam and James Schuyler which exemplify a fluid interiority in chiasmic relation with a locale and – drawing from an example of contemporary environment writing – proposes the concept of the feral as a mode of thought which does not so much challenge binarized conceptualizations such as wild/tame, nature/culture (or indeed, interior/exterior) as treat them as irrelevant. It suggests that ferality is particularly suited, therefore, to critical-creative thought.

Drawing upon the work of Paul Valéry, Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Simon Jarvis, this thesis argues that to write poetry is to utilize a way of thinking that is distinct from prose and distinctly feral. Consequently, any avowed poetics will always emerge after the event of writing, and will be an incomplete articulation. Bearing this in mind, the study goes on to reflect upon the accompanying poetry collection's techniques and the compositional practices developed while writing it in order to discern the impact of the research undertaken.

*Natural Phenomena*, the creative portion of this PhD thesis, is a collection of poems responding to the sub/urban locale and to the conceptualizations of 'nature' and interiority encountered during the course of study.

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'Walks' was commended in the 2015 Ware Open Poetry Competition. 'The Emerald City' appears in Number 83 of *The Rialto*.

## Chapter One

### ‘Woods etc.’: Responding to a Locale

[...] I cut down oak-wood steeps, round by  
Old Hall and down the disused railway steps  
to where the bus stop is and out [...]

(Haslam, 2010, p. 33)

When we encounter this piece of writing, with its hill, oak trees, steps and bus stop, do we think of it as describing an interior or an exterior experience? Do we think of it as being about ‘nature’ or not? It is likely we consider the extract to present a mixture of both ‘nature’ and whatever we place opposite it, and that our reading of it as a piece of poetry rather than prose affects whether or not we place it in the aforementioned category. As to the question of whether we are reading an experience of the ‘outside’ or ‘inside’, we might lean towards the former. But are such categories as ‘inside’, ‘outside’ and ‘nature’ as clearly-defined as these questions assume?

This thesis will argue that they aren’t. Deriving from my reflections upon creative practice, it asks what conceptual alternatives to binaries such as inside/outside or nature/culture exist, and through phenomenology’s prism, investigates the peculiar interleaving of interior and exterior that occurs in lived experience. The study offers examples of ‘between’ states such as the feral or the edgelands, finding in them a potential for critical thinking that need not resort to binarized categorizations. It argues that poetry offers a distinct mode of thought that has much in common with the feral – indeed, that it *is* feral – and as such, is particularly suited to conveying the lived experience of interiority.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use terms such as ‘poetry’ and ‘poems’ throughout this study rather than, in particular, ‘lyric’, in order to sidestep the bog of category definitions which has beset critical interest in the lyric. Indeed, one of this study’s assertions is that a concern with categorization, literary or otherwise, can stultify critical thought. However, I also acknowledge the fruitfulness of the recent focus on lyric poetry; an appreciation of the negotiations of intimacy and distance experienced by lyric’s reader has been instrumental to my thinking about interiority and relation in the contemporary poem. Crucial to that

To that end, this chapter takes two lines of enquiry. The first originates directly from my practice as a poet, contextualizing that felt imperative to respond poetically to locale and to environment in a wider sense. The second takes as its centre a reading of a poem by Alice Oswald, asking why it simultaneously attracts and frustrates and what critical and philosophical questions open out from it as a result.

As soon as ‘environment’ or ‘nature’ – especially ‘nature’ – appear in a discussion, or as subjects of poetry, we are entangled in competing conceptualizations of such terms. Subsequent chapters examine in further detail the differing discourses at play in those conceptualizations, with reference to the work of Timothy Morton, Kathleen Jamie and Michael Haslam in particular;<sup>2</sup> what this chapter seeks to do is to refine the use of terms and to situate my poetic territory in relation to those terms. To name that territory ‘environment’ sits uncomfortably, since it invokes ‘The Environment’ and the ecological movement too strongly. There is, of course, overlap, but concerns about pollution and global warming are a nagging, taken-for-granted presence rather than at the forefront of this creative-critical project. Accordingly, then, where it’s used, ‘environment’ is presented with an understanding that it always refers to a specific environment, a location, rather than the human-impacted ‘nature’ to which it often refers in general use. Similarly, given the vexed question of the ideologies surrounding constructs of ‘nature’, I enclose it in quotation marks. This is a parallel manoeuvre to that of Timothy Morton in *Ecology Without Nature*, where the term is presented as ‘Nature’ in order to indicate its ideological constructedness (2009, *passim*).

Having lived in the same part of London for seventeen years, I lay claim to the status of being ‘a local’ with scarcely a twitch of self-consciousness, so ‘locale’ and ‘environment’ are the terms this study adopts to describe my poetic terrain. In *Natural Phenomena*, which comprises the creative element of this thesis, I write to that locale. It’s not quite the edgelands of Farley and Symmons-Roberts (2012), certainly not the wide open spaces of Robert MacFarlane (2007). It isn’t as urban as Roy Fisher’s Birmingham or indeed, James

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appreciation have been the papers collected in the following: Hošek and Parker (1985); Dobran and Culler (2014) – as well as the following: Osborn (2012); Waters (2003); Blasing (2007).

<sup>2</sup> See Haslam (2010); Jamie (2005, 2012a, 2012b); Morton (2009, 2010a).

Schuyler's New York, for this locale has feral pockets.<sup>3</sup> There is a wood with an avenue of trees, planted at least a century ago, that leads to its scrubby untidiness; there is a park – formerly the grounds of a gentleman's estate – with ornamental ponds that stink in summer and fill with bread crusts and drinks cans and also sport kingfishers, herons, gulls, tufted ducks and greylag geese as well as the obligatory mallards, black-headed gulls and Canada geese. There is a High Street where cuts in government funding have led to local council 'advice shops' being closed and subsequently replaced with 'pop up' cafés and craft markets, where the dominance of nail bars is threatened by that of bookmakers. Nature here is nuanced, contingent; it is a ragged, scruffy landscape. The views are of power pylons vaulting over to Ilford in one direction, and in another, over the roofs of Victorian and Edwardian terraces, the tower blocks that were once social housing. Past those, there is the occasional punctuation of the buildings at Canary Wharf, while down the aforementioned avenue, the Shard and other nervy, twenty-first century attempts on the London skyline can be seen. Small wonder, then, that 'between' states that refuse boundaries have seemed so attractive, for the indeterminate is all around me; a reality of my everyday, lived experience – the very experience I have been writing.

Finding a literary context for the work has further emphasized the indeterminacy of this locale. As already hinted, available contemporary writings overlap with but don't quite account for the environment portrayed in *Natural Phenomena* – and where there are similarities, the attitude towards place is often manifestly different. As with the 'landskips' of the Picturesque and vistas of the Sublime, there is something about 'nature writing' that might presuppose a view into a distance – preferably one containing 'natural' features rather than the towers of London's Docklands or the ArcelorMittel Orbit or any other number of contemporary follies that inhabit the skyline of my home. This need not be a barrier to claiming an affinity; after all, writing about contingent 'nature' in 'ordinary', sub/urban places is often vaunted as what is characteristically new in 'the new nature writing'.<sup>4</sup> However, I have a more fundamental reservation about aligning the collection with such

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Fisher (1961, 1962); Schuyler (1993).

<sup>4</sup> See Wilkes (2014, p. 3) for use and discussion of this term, which also points out the homogenizing effect such a label has upon the often-differing writings to which it can be applied.



texts, due to the way in which they often posit ‘nature’ as an object of attention, something ‘out there’, to be visited or ‘objectively’ observed rather than lived with, written in relation to, experienced.

For that reason, *Natural Phenomena* also sits ill with the somewhat alienated peregrinations of psychogeography, as evidenced in, for example, those of Iain Sinclair’s works discussing East London and its environs.<sup>5</sup> Although less alienated, modulations upon the flâneur/flâneuse – such as the writings discussed in Zoë Skoulding’s study of women writers and urban spaces (2013) – don’t quite furnish an appropriate description either. There are too few shops and streets and people in the poems for that and too many other things; icebergs as well as shopping malls, goshawks as well as plastic debris. Furthermore, the locale is neither toured nor visited nor passed through. With such apparent rootedness, the collection might draw to it a description as ‘sub/urban pastoral’, except that the tropes of pastoral threaten to distort the experience described. *Natural Phenomena* is not an idyll or interlude; it presents lived, day-to-day experience. Nor does it present an implicit critique of the city from the vantage point of the countryside or from a ‘special’ geographical or imaginative space within said city (as is the case with ‘urban pastoral’); it is simultaneously of the built environment *and* of the ‘natural’, and perhaps too engaged with both to offer critique, implicit or otherwise, of either. Although pastoral and its traditions and tropes are crucial to this study, then, reading my own work within that context is problematic.<sup>6</sup>

If the poems in *Natural Phenomena* aren’t wholly about the ‘Woods’, then neither are they wholly about the ‘etc.’, to mutilate the title of the poem to which this study will turn shortly. What is needed is the space between those two words, a place or a state or an activity that can partake of both, exist between both. Moreover, if the poems in *Natural Phenomena* present an in-between, difficult-to-categorize terrain, they also attend to a parallel indeterminacy in subjective experience – particularly when it is in relation with environment – and are much occupied with the way in which interiority and environment seem to bleed

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<sup>5</sup> See Sinclair (2003, 2011); Sinclair and Grimes (2009).

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter Three for a consideration of the pastoral against contemporary writings about ‘nature’, and Chapter Four’s examination of the description of James Schuyler’s work as ‘urban pastoral’.

in and out of each other. By interiority, I mean that sense of what is mine, of a body-self (to use a term which bypasses the Cartesian mind/body division so antithetical to the aims of this study).<sup>7</sup> Such an interiority encompasses inner thought and voice as well as perception and the tangible stuff of physicality. This has been more readily represented in the poetic works discussed in this thesis than any of the prose texts mentioned above, and one of this study's aims is to unpick the reasons for that.

In order to consider how environment provokes thinking about interiority, and how poetic technique might refract that thinking, I propose a reading of a poem that illuminates as much as it frustrates. The titular poem of Alice Oswald's collection, *Woods etc.* (2005) is particularly interesting for its presentation of 'nature' and the way in which pronouns – particularly the first person and its associated possessives – are deployed. Both these aspects of the poem are instructive in a not wholly auspicious way, and a substantial part of my reading is devoted to the frustrations I encounter. I have long been an admirer of Alice Oswald's work, particularly for the interweaving of human and 'natural' in her long poems *Dart* (2002) and *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009), so it's with no small perplexity that I note these frustrations. Principal amongst them – in fact, foundational to them – is the poem's underlying philosophical assumption that objective understanding of subjective experience is possible. Consequently, 'Woods etc.' (Oswald, 2005, p.7) is also founded upon unambiguously established boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside', 'self' and 'not-self' – boundaries which, it follows, can be usurped or conquered. However, it is also worth pointing out that as a reader, I meet Oswald's poem with an irritation that might have less to do with philosophy (at least, initially) and more to do with the poem's status as an example of an effect I am anxious to avoid in my own creative work: the oracular tone that the poem's deployment of 'I' introduces (on which, more later).

But to return to the conceptualizations that underpin 'Woods etc.'. In its presentation of a walk in the woods, Oswald's poem positions 'nature' as an 'outside' to enter; an object of attention to master or worship. Diction choices reinforce this, a striking example of which is at line twelve, with the 'upturned apses of the eyes'. 'Apses' suggests curved recesses that are as receptive and passive as the 'widening wound' of hearing in line

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<sup>7</sup> For previous use of this term, see for example Sparkes (1996); Kumar and Menon (2013).

six, but additionally, avid for information. Given that ‘apse’ is most usually used in connection with churches and religious buildings, we are presented with the act of looking as reverential. We might question the sincerity of that piety, in the absence of any further contemplation of or even reference to the divine or the spiritual (‘apse’ is the only word carrying such connotations, and is the only word clearly from a religious lexical field). Indeed, ‘Woods etc.’ doesn’t present a spiritual experience, for its intelligence seeks to have its own integrity simultaneously challenged and confirmed by encounter, rather than transformed. This is an aesthetic experience only, where looking is as much about owning and being augmented by what one owns, as it is about appreciating.

This is all in keeping with a poem where the boundaries between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ – not to mention ‘mind’ and ‘body’ – are so strongly entrenched, right through to the level of poetic technique, as in the above example, where the metaphor’s tenor (eyes) implies the internal, and its vehicle (apses) suggest externality. Thus also in stanza one, the ‘footfall’ (which is contradictory in that it ‘wanders’ yet is ‘steady’) has a regularizing action in its ‘sweeping together’ other sounds that are ‘loose tacks’ at line four. These tacks, being the sounds of the wood, can only be brought into order and intelligibility by that ‘footfall’, a sound connected to human action. The alterity of the wood remains, somewhere beyond, and it is human awareness and understanding that dominates and organizes perception and understanding. It appears that, far from being an addendum to the ‘Woods’, the ‘etc.’ is dominant, and the ‘etc.’ is human. To shift otherwise would be to threaten that defended, demarcated interiority. This is amply demonstrated by those ‘tacks’: it is interesting that these sounds are akin to sharp pins or nails; the implication is that they offer a threat of injury and that, being loose, they are not performing their function, which is to secure objects to each other. The very instruments of cohesion are themselves disparate – until, of course, they are made intelligible by a co-ordinating, human intelligence. The ‘tacks’ also hold connotations of the verb ‘to tack’, as in tacking a boat, which suggests short movements in alternating directions – movements which would be of little avail without a co-ordinating plan or intention. All possible meanings are still in service of the subject/object division.

That the environment’s sounds are presented as sharp and potentially injurious is significant, for this speaks of a conceptual relationship with the world where the self and its borders are defended even as their dissolution (in this case, in the contact between

landscape and walker) might be desired. As asserted above, this conceptualization stems from the reliance upon objectivity of understanding as a philosophical stance. In this poem, hearing itself is a ‘wound’ – a ‘widening wound’, in fact, at line six. A wound allows ingress, and in the sensitivity of flesh unusually exposed, brings awareness to the ‘in’ of the body under the skin. This wound’s enlargement appears as if of its own volition, independent of its owner, and the fact that it is ‘widening’ signals that there has been a previous incursion of outside upon inside. Significantly, it is not a point on the body that is wounded but a sense, which involves not only skin and flesh, but nerves, liquids, electrical impulses – not to mention an entire conceptual and intellectual history. The place of meeting between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is an unusually tender entry point; ingress threatens damage to and depletion of the ‘I’, the co-ordinating intelligence of the poem, and the only alternative to this objectivist impasse is solipsism – for as lines one to two would have it, the ‘footfall’ ‘wanders through the mind’ (and not a wood), trapping the experience within.

However, as signalled earlier, there is a reaching beyond this realm, a wish for it to be usurped. Consider the third stanza:

that my feet kept time with the sun’s imaginary  
 changing position, hoping it would rise  
 suddenly from scattered parts of my body  
 into the upturned apses of my eyes.

(ibid)

The dismemberment and dissemination (‘scattered’ carrying with it connotations of sowing and harvest) of the body’s parts result in the interpenetration of the body with the wood and the celestial. A hope is expressed not just that the sun will ‘rise’ (the reader is invited to pause on this meaning by the line break) but that, extraordinarily, it will rise ‘from scattered parts of my body’ (and again, a line break allows the consideration that light arises from flesh) ‘into’ the eyes. But this scattering does not result in dissolution or transformation; quite the opposite. The sun’s ‘changing position’ must be ‘imaginary’, since it is the individual, standing at a fixed position on the globe, who changes position relative to the sun and not vice versa. An objective conceptualization of the sun dominates, despite the possibility of conveying a quite ‘other’ experience. Reading it from a different angle, it

is possible to say that ‘the sun’s imaginary / changing position’ suggests either that ‘I’ cannot see it or that the ‘I’ has conjured it – and both of these meanings serve to strengthen the impression that nothing has autonomy apart from the ‘I’. The ‘I’ has become wood and horizon, expanding to obliterate or occupy the environment so fully that it is everything, nothing is apart. Although the poem presents interpenetration of human and ‘more-than-human’ (as David Abram would have it<sup>8</sup>) and despite the ready dismemberment of the locus of human attention into speaking, hearing, limbs and so on, the human realm still dominates. The ‘natural’ world is merely a means for demonstrating a certain preciousness of attention. This is frustrating because it conveys only an aesthetic experience rather than a spiritual or transformative one, and because it displays a proprietary relationship to ‘nature’ which falls short of conveying its alterity and agency – but that isn’t the only objection. Through this presentation, the experience of interiority is limited to the binary of inside/outside, despite its grasping after an experience of subjectivity that resides in both.

Given these issues, a key consideration of poetic technique must be the use of the first person and its attendant possessive pronouns. As noted, the ‘I’ remains intact and separate – separate, even, from the body with which it identifies and which it observes being scattered and giving rise to light. This is heavily emphasized by its first appearance in upper case at the start of stanza two: ‘I remember walking into increasing woods’ (ibid). Note that it appears at the beginning of a line, a stanza *and* a new sentence, all of which serve to embody that separation. From this heavy landing into the poem, it seeds a proliferation of possessiveness. Throughout the lines that follow there can be found: ‘*my* body’, ‘*my* eyes’, ‘*my* throat’, ‘*my* speech’, ‘*my* spine’ (my italics). Contrast these possessive pronouns with line two’s ‘the mind’, where using the definite article opens up this phrase. Since the phrase can refer to a category (of biological object or entity, for example) as well as an individual example, ‘the mind’ could just as easily refer to every or any mind – including the reader’s. Similarly, consider the verbs in the first stanza, which belong to a ‘footfall’ which is unattached to any possessive pronoun or other deictic marker and thus could be anybody’s – or nobody’s. There is a marked difference in poetic technique between the first and second stanzas, which is far from insignificant, and which I discuss

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<sup>8</sup> See Abram (1997, passim).

further below. With the mind/body split in full effect, once this deictic centre is established, it is not dismantled, whatever happens to the body (in this case, dismemberment and dilution). The bounded integrity of that centre belies a desire for control over the sort of interiority which is defended, sealed and vulnerable to ‘attack’, and this inevitably leads to the performing of structural control.<sup>9</sup> Where the poem risks untidiness, tentativeness and doubt (as in stanza one), those effects are quickly countered. The risk is too great, and a stable persona is firmly established and maintained.

The poem appears to acknowledge its philosophical failure even as it enacts the very reason for its failure. It wishes to step beyond the body and the ‘I’, into a magical area where the wood’s alterity reveals itself and is understood, but that can never be possible with such conceptual frameworks in place. That acknowledgement of failure can be found in the presentation of sound and speech. Consider: ‘first your voice and then the rustling ceasing’ (ibid). In this line, occurring in stanza two, sounds both human (‘your voice’) and inhuman (‘rustling’) are ‘ceasing’, and no other sounds appear to replace them. Their lack is unrelieved, as line thirteen at the start of stanza four reveals: ‘no clearing in that quiet, no change at all’ (ibid). In this quiet, the ‘natural’ world appears to slide away, successfully evading encounter. Moreover, although the poem ends with a sense of human speech diminishing as it is confounded by environment, this does not lead to any new understanding. The ‘little mercury line / that regulates my speech’ (ibid) in lines fourteen to fifteen falls down a spine that is endless. Just as the woods fall in behind the ‘I’, so the alternative to speech is not offered, despite its apparent failure in the face of that unremitting quiet. It is still ‘my speech’, endlessly traversing the human body, transforming into nothing else. This is a peculiarly bereft ending, where the individual has been dismembered, has experienced a kind of assault on hearing, has found speech to fail – yet still remains free of any transforming encounter with environment.

If the poem is about an encounter between human and ‘more-than-human’, it is also about writing poetry. It might be said that although the poem tells us human speech fails in

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<sup>9</sup> In addition, it’s entirely possible that the pressure to demonstrate ‘mastery’ (with all the cultural and gendered connotations of control and dominance that word contains) of poetic technique and subject matter has generated certain imperatives for Oswald at this early stage in her career, whether acknowledged or not.

such an encounter, it contradicts and denies what it tells us through its formal control. The stress pattern of the lines could be described as loosely four- and five-stress at most, which, along with the quatrain stanza and the a-b rhyming pattern, is enough to – just about – evoke ballad form. In addition, the sixteen lines use a rhyming pattern that shadows the sonnet form, with the ‘excessive’ lines fifteen and sixteen enacting a kind of falling away, as though the poem’s ‘speech’ both exceeds and fails its expression of its own literariness. This reflexivity is further emphasized by the use of such words as ‘line’, as well as the aforementioned ‘speech’ – which as ‘my speech’, could read as the poem’s speech. The ‘mercury line’ in the ‘throat’ is an instrument of measurement, but it also ‘regulates’; just as the quatrain form and loosely regular rhythm of the poem’s lines echo the measures used in ballad form, and regulate the sentences of which it consists. Here is a poem which demonstrates awareness of its place in relation to literary and song traditions, which inhabits and stretches the forms associated with those traditions, but only so far. Just as the places of the human and ‘more-than-human’ in relation to each other are firmly demarcated, so is the place of this poem in relation to formal conventions. Its reflexivity leads nowhere but to an admiration of poetic control over technique, so over-riding is the imperative to establish ‘mastery’ over the language art<sup>10</sup> it practices.

Reading ‘Woods etc.’ closely proves instructive in that it clearly demonstrates a philosophical relation to ‘nature’ and to sense experience antipathetical to my own collection’s intentions. Yet it also instructs by the possibilities it contains for alternative conceptualizations and the way in which they might be expressed through poetic technique, particularly in its first stanza. These brief arisings of poetic and philosophical alternatives are all the more pronounced because they are not developed, appearing only as discombobulating moments within the poem. Yet it is those discombobulations which serve as an introduction to the philosophical, critical and poetic modes explored throughout the rest of this thesis. Consider the moment offered by the first stanza:

footfall, which is a means so steady  
and in small sections wanders through the mind  
unnoticed, because it beats constantly,

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<sup>10</sup> The term derives from Valéry: ‘Poetry is an art of Language’ (1958, p. 59).

sweeping together the loose tacks of sound

(ibid)

It has an attractively mobile quality, consisting as it does of one sentence – but one which is not bounded by the conventions of prose punctuation. It flows over line endings to fill the entire quatrain, giving an impression of movement barely contained, which is driven by the enjambment of ‘mind / unnoticed’ as well as by the connectives ‘which’ and ‘because’ and the embedded clauses they allow to follow. That this mobile quality occurs in counterpoint with regular quatrains and an a-b pattern of pararhyming end words conveys strongly an impression of fluidity.

This fluidity works in tandem with an effect of provisionality, established as the stanza begins mid-sentence with ‘footfall’. Omitting the first part of the clause, rather than, for example, the more grammatically conventional ‘There is a...’ or ‘I hear a...’ evokes forms of writing such as the observational note, or even experiences such as the appearance of a thought, unbidden, when one is immersed in a quite other activity. To note down an unbidden word or phrase that enters the mind while washing up or walking somewhere is to acknowledge their vulnerability to change, to being discarded, to time passing.

Another effect of this technique is the creation of a sense of intimacy. The note, to which the grammatical constructions in ‘Woods etc.’ are oriented, is predicated on intimacy; in its omissions it assumes the reader already understands the context and has no need of further explanation, and it is often written with only oneself in mind. If notes are often responses to thoughts that appear as fragments of language in the mind, then they are records of perhaps the most intimate language experience, since they occur in so apparently internal an arena. The sense of privacy that ‘footfall’ so strongly creates – a strength of effect enhanced by its position as the first word of the poem – is continued by the other sentence openings that function in the same way: ‘first your voice’ at line seven, ‘no clearing’ at line thirteen. Furthermore, the lower case letters which begin all sentences except that which begins with ‘I’, and the fact that the sentences that comprise the whole of the first stanza and the last three lines of the last are not terminated by anything other than a line break, give each of these sentences’ statements a tentative air, as if being uttered ‘sotto voce’, as if pieces of an evolving, incomplete chain of thought. This creates an interesting and fruitful tension between tentative performance and technical mastery, in



opposition to elsewhere in the poem, where – as discussed – the dominant performance is that of control.

That tension, so crucial to the way in which the poem both attracts and frustrates, is enhanced by the transition to stanza two – and it is here that the disconcerting of the reader intensifies. The stanza break before line five has introduced a pause where we might fancy ourselves listening for the sounds discussed. But that fancy is interrupted: demarcated time is introduced with ‘I remember once’. The poem is no longer quite in the present tense of ‘wanders’, much less the present continuous of ‘sweeping’; rather, an event has occurred (‘once’), detaching the reader from the ongoing walking and hearing of the first stanza. Moreover, although the verb ‘remember’ allows us to remain with the ‘now’ of the poem, it is attached to an ‘I’, which narrows down the experience described to an individual as well as to a specific moment, in which – the suggestion is enough to disconcert – the reader can only participate second hand, since it is mediated by its presentation as memory. The problem is not so much that we are distanced from the experience, however. After all, at the appearance of the deictic centre, there is nothing preventing us from assimilating the poem into our own experience. It is perfectly possible to read the poem as Helen Vendler suggests, ‘saying the words of the poem *in propria persona*, internally and with proprietary feeling’ (1995, p. xi), and thus lay claim to the experience of the poem; to be full of ‘forgetfulness of one’s role as reader ... as one “enters” the lyric and becomes, instead, its “utterer” ’ (Waters, 2003, p. 14). As William Waters observes, in his discussion of Vendler’s concept, ‘this is the very stuff of imaginative reading’ (ibid). But the contrast between stanzas one and two, where we are called on to perform a different kind of ‘imaginative reading’, disconcerts. The sensation is of trying to fit the foot into a too-small shoe as the possibilities offered by stanza one’s indeterminacy of location, identity and time are frustrated. Against that open intimacy of the first stanza then, the second stanza offers a much more static and distancing experience of time and event and it is this that diminishes the sense of possibility in that meticulously attentive opening.

Yet this instance of frustration also yields one of those states this chapter (and more broadly, the thesis) has been chasing; the blooming of a kind of ‘bafflement’ – to borrow a term from Simon Jarvis (2010b, p. 282) – which opens out the indeterminate and enables a moment in reading which escapes any homogenizing or paraphraseable explication. The effect, as the reader has to change gear between the first and second stanzas, is of a

lurching instant of doubt and hesitation about laying claim to the 'I'. It lingers over the ensuing stanzas, emphasized and perpetuated by the introduction of the second person possessive at line seven. Here, 'your voice' might be another way of saying 'one's voice', that is, 'my voice', the voice of the 'I'. But it's ambiguous. Does 'your voice' belong to an as-yet barely acknowledged companion? Is the reader being addressed or is it her own voice? After all, even if we read the poem silently, it is likely that our own voices resound residually inside our heads.

This is an example of the 'wild spot' remarked by William Waters in his critical study of poetic address, *Poetry's Touch*.<sup>11</sup> At its centre is the experience of 'what it is like to be someone reading (here, now)' (2003, p. 15), and the way in which the use of the second person can bring that disconcertingly alive. It's serendipitous that Waters uses the trope of wildness, for it dovetails not only with this study's use of writings about environment as a way of complicating its understanding both of 'nature' and of interiority, but also with a similar trope that occurs in some of the literature surveyed. That trope is the feral, and it comes to stand in this critical thesis for a particular quality of indeterminacy, where understanding of a text falters and escapes articulation, where the effect of a text cannot fully be accounted for in literary discourse, and certainly cannot be integrated into a paraphraseable account of its content. Chapter Three examines ferality and its associations in more detail; here, we return to Waters' 'wildness' and to that effect, in which the second person may establish poetry's 'claim to make an accidental reader into the destined and unique recipient of everything the poem contains or is' (ibid). In 'Woods etc.', this effect flickers in and out of being: the reader owns the footfall, then she does not, the 'I' does. Then we are pushed aside, corrected in our mistake as 'you' further unsettles our understanding. When 'I' and 'you' occur, the reader is pulled, back and forth across the

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<sup>11</sup> Waters' study treads between 'two different domains, the formal and the phenomenological, to which two different critical vocabularies attach'. For Waters, these domains are 'always, finally, two sides of one coin' and accordingly, his study takes account of the second person as 'a formal feature of the printed text' *and* of its effect upon 'the poem's recipient, the reader as she finds herself in relation to the poem's acts of address.' (2003, pp. 14-15) This critical thesis follows his lead in doing likewise.

dividing lines between being an addressee, a witness or a participant – and this wildness persists, despite the poem's imperative towards stability and control. It haunts us as we track the walking intelligence, line by line, down the poem, through its integrity's survival of bodily dismemberment, through its ironic articulation of the failure of human speech.

This dance of technique between stability and 'wild spots', between producing a paraphrasing, fully-accounting reading and one which registers 'bafflements', is both the attraction and frustration attending 'Woods etc.' (Oswald, 2005, p.7). It suggests that – even in a poetry where indeterminacy of meaning is not pursued – poetic thought and writing can give room to those in-between states, and offer an alternative to the reified, dichotomous thinking that produces rigid categorizations such as inside/outside, failing as they do to account fully for lived experience. It suggests that poetry might be especially well-placed to write environment, to simultaneously acknowledge human impact and the autonomy or alterity of all that is not human. Furthermore, poetry's qualities as a 'language art' which partakes of the same material as prose but orients it differently (often radically so) towards meaning are fundamental to these capabilities. We can see this even in such a poem as 'Woods etc.', which sets out to encounter and be changed by alterity and returns merely troubled and frustrated.

Such is the starting point for this study. It begins, in the following chapter, with the vexed question of interiority and sense experience, considering what phenomenology might offer in the search for a philosophical position that doesn't rely on the myth of objectivity, and placing against this theoretical framework a poem by Michael Haslam – the very poem extracted at the start of this chapter. After considering eco-writing and pastoral and what they might teach about irony and 'nature' writing, the thesis goes on to chase down those feral moments of readerly 'bafflement', where, by virtue of its unique expression as poetic thought, the poem appears to open out into a quite other space.

## Chapter 2

### 'Threaded through': Language, Environment, Interiority

'Woods etc.' presents a border usurped, a body breached and dismembered, and speech as failure. But what if that border was never really there? What if everything is more permeable than Oswald's poem would have it? What if in the realm of language, for example, the inside/outside border is non-existent? This chapter considers interiority in the light of such questions via the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and asks if it is possible to write about environment with interaction rather than domination as the over-riding principle. It then moves on to a reading of the work of Michael Haslam, in order to discover how a less bounded interiority might be manifest in poetic technique. Haslam's collection, *A Cure for Woodness* (2010), engages not only with the particularities of locale but also with constructs of 'nature', and its exploration of subjective experience is enabled in its subtlety by the verse practices it deploys as part of an aesthetic and linguistic coherence. 'Old Hall Down in the Hollow: Spring Up Sunny Bank' (op. cit., pp. 31-8), the poem examined in this chapter, is similar to 'Woods etc.' in its occupation with an individual's interactions with a 'natural' environment and the effect of each upon the other, but the strategies of its thought – and thus of its technique – are quite different.

To understand why, it's necessary to consider again that impasse that 'Woods etc.' sets up for itself, which is indicative of Oswald's philosophical outlook at this stage in her career. Her early work, which includes her book-length poem about the river Dart (2002), quickly drew to her the label of 'Nature Poet'; a label she has rejected.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as the scope of her work has widened – and especially since the publication of *Memorial* (2011), a version of Homer's *Iliad* – this label has seemed less and less appropriate. In a statement published at the same time as her first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996a), Oswald asserts that she is 'not a nature poet, though I do write about the special nature of what happens to exist' (Oswald, 1996b, p.1). It is here that we see the assumption from which 'Woods etc.' proceeds and which limits the poem. The phrase 'special nature' works against the rest of her statement, where 'happens to' suggests that her subject matter appears independently, haphazardly, without intention or interference, as if the poet merely

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Evans-Bush (2013); Knight (2009).

sets down what is before her – as if the person has no effect upon the wood through which she walks. Yet that use of ‘special’ signals that this suggestion of autonomy is false. It is in fact the poet’s ‘specialness’ that is presented here, for ‘special nature’ is that which *she* deems particular, characteristic, noteworthy; what *she* perceives (and therefore presents as existing); what she considers to be ‘nature’. The piece continues:

People are so delighted by the idea of gardening, but in the end it weathers you away.  
The inaccessibility of what you’re working with becomes terrible. I do write about  
that. (ibid)

Despite the proximity of the gardener/poet to ‘what you’re working with’ – despite, presumably, her actions having some effect on plants and soil – Oswald presents ‘what happens to exist’ as something which eludes her so emphatically that it not only elicits the strong emotion of terror, but erodes her individuality with a cumulative force: ‘it weathers you away’. Her statement provokes two questions. One is about such a presentation of individuality as separate, impermeable and vulnerable to attack, and the other is about that ‘inaccessibility’. Why should it be so ‘terrible’?

Thomas Nagel (1974) shows that this inaccessibility is inevitable, based as it is upon a belief in the objectivity of understanding and the ability of materialism to account for subjective experience – a belief that will always be frustrated, since its reductionism will always prevent it from achieving its goal. The terms on which Oswald bases her will to overcome the ‘inaccessibility’ of plants, soil, rocks, landscape, animals, birds – of anything that is ‘more-than-human’ – ensure that she will always encounter their stubborn resistance – in language as well as in the world – to her attempts at capturing or presenting them. This impasse always throws the poet back upon her own perception, thought and language, experienced as walled-off from whatever is ‘outside’.

This ‘inaccessibility’ is perhaps a particularly fraught issue for Oswald at this stage in her career, too. It is possible that it has become the grounds on which the success or otherwise of her poems (and by extension her competence as a poet) can be judged. As we have seen in ‘Woods etc.’, the attempt to overcome this ‘inaccessibility’ expresses itself through technique; through, for example, the adoption of an oracular or reverential tone and in the deployment of the ‘I’ to create stability. This urge towards stability and control

can be equated with an imperative to demonstrate ‘mastery’ over one’s craft. Hence the establishing of a stable deictic centre, the use of authority as a tonal feature surrounding that centre and a will to overcome the resistance of the object of attention, which is firmly positioned in such a way that its alterity is inevitable yet always a source of anxiety.

When it is thrown back upon perception and is unable to ‘access’ that alterity, ‘Woods etc.’ does indeed reflexively consider perception, but it goes no further, unable to escape the loop it has made for itself. As Chapter One observed, the body may be dismembered, distributed amongst the natural phenomena, but the ‘I’ is not. It remains intact, individuated from the sun and the sounds of trees and birds. At this stage of her poetic career at least, the issue of ‘inaccessibility’ does not lead the writer to reconsider the philosophical basis from which she writes about environment, and this is evident throughout the poem’s technique.

A way out of Oswald’s impasse, not to mention a way of avoiding the materialism inherent in such binaries as inside/outside and nature/culture, can be found in phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writings on perception – particularly his later writings in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) – offer an alternative to the dualist subject/object relationship to which Oswald subscribes. For Merleau-Ponty, we cannot detach our sensing body from our thinking, and we cannot detach our body-self from what we perceive, since everything we encounter is in the context of that sensing, thinking physicality. Reciprocity characterizes our experiences and our encounters; so it is that Merleau-Ponty calls attention to the ‘reversibility’ of sensation. One notable example is that of a person’s two hands touching each other and the way in which it is possible to go back and forth between the sensation of touching and of being touched. Thus:

the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases. And everything said about the sensed body pertains to the whole of the sensible of which it is a part, and to the world. If the body is one sole body in its two phases, it incorporates into itself the whole of the sensible and with the same movement incorporates itself into a “Sensible in itself.” We have to reject the age-old

assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body as in a box.  
(Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 138)

Perceiving and being perceived in the individual are twinned, indivisible – and this reversible experience of perceiving and being perceived carries over, it is implied, into our encounters in the world. It's important to note, at this point, that Merleau-Ponty doesn't present a relationship between perceiving human and perceived tree, for example, in order to illustrate this concept. Rather, the examples he uses – such as that of the colour red (op. cit., p. 132) – are chosen in order to emphasize the way in which perception conditions our relationship with the world so totally that to understand that relationship 'outside' perception is pointless. Key to understanding this are Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the chiasm and the flesh. The chiasm is a cross-over point:

The chiasm is not only a me other exchange (the messages he receives reach me, the messages I receive reach him), it is also an exchange between me and the world, between the phenomenal body and the 'objective' body, between the perceiving and the perceived: what begins as a thing ends as consciousness of the thing, what begins as a 'state of consciousness' ends as a thing. (op. cit., p. 215)

This is a constantly oscillating state:

Like the natural man, we situate ourselves in ourselves *and* in the things, in ourselves *and* in the other, at the point where, by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others and we become world. (op. cit., p. 160)

So this oscillation between perceiving and being perceived doesn't recognise the absolute, conceptual separation which renders Oswald's objects of perception inaccessible. In fact, it just doesn't appear: 'Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?' (op. cit., p. 138) The flesh, Merleau-Ponty states,

is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element', in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is,

in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an ‘element’ of Being. (op. cit., p. 139)

There is a reciprocity between me and the world through which I move, to which I respond, joined as I am to it by perception. The thoughts and responses I might commonly think of as ‘mine’, or ‘inside me’ are conditioned by that perception and involved in a kind of ‘exchange’ with the world. My dual experience as a perceiver and that-which-is-perceived ensures that exchange, ensures that I ‘situate’ myself (the verb is Merleau-Ponty’s) both ‘inside’ (my body) and ‘outside’. This is nowhere more evident than in the sense experience of hearing. Indeed, our encounters with the phenomenon of sound challenge very immediately any notions of the impermeability of our bodies’ boundaries, as Edith Lecourt observes: ‘sound reaches us from everywhere, it surrounds us, goes through us, and in addition to our voluntary sonorous productions, sounds even escape surreptitiously from our own bodies’ (1990, p. 211).<sup>13</sup> Even these sounds, generated by one’s own body, are perceived as external,<sup>14</sup> and hearing’s comparative passivity in the face of such apparent incursions – as anyone trying to study in a noisy environment will attest – is an often uncomfortable reminder that the body-self has sites of ingress and egress which are more diffuse and less under the will’s control than first imagined. Where we can control sight by simply closing our eyes, we cannot do the same with hearing. We perceive sounds whether we want to or not and cannot unhear the world. Even if we were to walk around with ear plugs jammed in all day, or headphones piping white noise into our ears, there would still be the sounds of the body with which to contend – and not only those

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<sup>13</sup> See also Walter J. Ong on the way in which ‘sound pours into the hearer’ (2012, p. 71). The Cartesian mind/body split that still clings to such statements as ‘the body is a frontier between myself and everything else’ (op. cit., p. 72) – where ‘myself’ is sheltered by and therefore separate from the body – is not a philosophical concept this thesis promotes, but Ong is illuminating on sound’s capacity for ‘mapping’ interiority and for its immersive qualities. See Ong (2012, pp. 70-73 and 1967, pp. 111-75).

<sup>14</sup> Lecourt (2004) also discusses this aspect of perception further in the context of her work with autistic children.



sounds which escape our orifices, voluntarily or involuntarily, as John Cage's famous encounter with an anechoic chamber demonstrates.<sup>15</sup>

However, this constant immersion of the body-self in sound need not be experienced as negative. J. Doron – whose work, like Lecourt, is collected in Didier Anzieu's edited volume on psychic envelopes (1990) – considers sound's inter-relation with interiority in the course of his discussion of the way in which the psychic envelope might function during creative work. He gives an account of painting in the open air at Port de Gaulée, where, at the point of finishing, he notices, 'a few words ran through my mind, which I snatched as they flew by' and remarks that 'These words recalled sounds, the only sensations that made the body's boundaries palpable.' (Doron, 1990, p. 198). Although hearing isn't the *only* sensation that brings such frontiers to the foreground, it is certainly an exemplary one, and Doron's discussion of the way in which notions of inside, outside or even self change during creative practice is instructive for our investigation into interiority's oscillations. In fact, for Doron, all these elements – interiority, exteriority, body-self – are in continual flux during the creative act:

My perception of the port changed radically. I was no longer someone looking at this or that part – I was a noise, a balance, painting. The feeling of being a whole being disappeared. I was projected into things: the weight, the rhythm of the colours and their shape were inside me and acted on the painting that was coming into existence. This state of openness, of reversal of the psychic envelope of the ego, lasted for the time it took to paint most of the landscape.' (op. cit., p. 197)

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<sup>15</sup> 'For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible. Such a room is called an anechoic chamber, its six walls made of special material, a room without echoes. I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death.' (Cage, 1961, p. 8)

In this excerpt, the 'I' is fragmented, and it's possible to draw a parallel with the dismemberment occurring in 'Woods etc.'. Unlike 'Woods etc.', this fragmenting of 'a whole being' entails its dissolution. Doron's 'I' becomes sound, activity, is both 'projected into things' and opened to them. Thus it isn't a case of sound impinging on the artist's sense perceptions, of it filling an imagined cavity in the head,<sup>16</sup> but rather a case of the sense perceptions facilitating involution, where the artist experiences his thoughts meeting environment meeting activity and – in Doron's psychoanalytical theoretical frame – the self turns inside out. That the 'I' is 'projected' indicates that Doron considers it to exist prior to that projection, separate from that into which it is projected. In his discussion, if the self experiences dissolution, continuing awareness doesn't – and resolves into a self at the end of the process. At first glance this might suggest a philosophical conceptualization such as that to which 'Woods etc.' subscribes – an impression strengthened by the manner in which the 'I' stamps itself throughout the excerpt. However, unlike 'Woods etc.', when the 'I' experiences fragmentation, this leads to a transformation where 'I' yields to locale, and where awareness of the reciprocity of such a meeting appears.

For Doron, reflecting on this experience and bringing his psychoanalytic practice to bear on his artistic one, this turning inside-out seems to be an inevitable action of the mind during creative work:

Depending upon the subject's functioning and type of creativity, internal and external can be seen to alternate as categories of thought inside or outside the mind. This oscillation occurs around an axis, a psychic operator, or an object created by the subject or by others carrying projections. This object then puts the inside and outside into relationship. (op. cit., p. 192)

Oscillation, an axis, a destabilizing of inside and outside as categories and their swapping and crossing; all this is very reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm and the reversibility of sense impressions. In fact, the 'psychic fulcrum' that occurs in creative

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of conceptualizations of interiorities, particularly the persistent imagining of a cavity where one's inner voice or thought might reside, see Riley (2014) – and Riley (2007), where interiors of a different sort are imagined.

work, also described as a ‘space of indefiniteness’ must be chiasmic in nature (op. cit., p. 200). Although I don’t propose to pursue the theories underpinning Doron’s psychoanalytical account, it’s worth quoting further his discussion of what is at work in the mind, in order to note the points of convergence with phenomenological concepts of interiority and perception.

This space would be the battleground where internal and external perceptions of the self confront one another on the psychic envelope, which either resists or not.

Creating, from the individual’s point of view, consists in giving a double description of the self. Representing his psychological life on the internal interface means using the work as container for his emotions, allowing the envelope and the space of indefiniteness to be crossed by sensations perceived on the outside means captivating the internal part of the self and turning inside out, breaking and reconstructing his identity through light, water, objects and faces.’ (op. cit., pp. 200-201)

It is striking that Doron’s descriptions of his creative experience mirror so closely what Merleau-Ponty has written about painting in a late essay, ‘Eye and Mind’. Compare the above, or indeed the earlier description quoted above, where ‘I was projected into things: the weight, the rhythm of the colours and their shape were inside me and acted on the painting that was coming into existence’ (op. cit., p. 197) to this:

The painter [...] *while he is painting* practices a magical theory of vision. He is obliged to admit that objects before him pass into him or else that [...] the mind goes out through the eyes to wander among objects; for the painter never ceases adjusting his clairvoyance to them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.166)

In both Merleau-Ponty’s and Doron’s conceptualization of this creative process, if the painter has her ‘others who haunt me and whom I haunt’ (op. cit., p. 160), then they, too, have her. Compared to the visual, however, sound’s immersive qualities – and thus its challenge to bounded conceptualizations of the body-self – are much greater, and hence this study’s emphasis upon hearing rather than sight. Hence – despite the fact that Doron

is a visual artist – the inclusion in his account of sound’s impact upon the painter’s body-self is neither ‘add-on’ nor an interference but an integral part of the experience. How much more intense must the oscillation be between interior and exterior, how much more blurred or effaced – or doubled in its blurring or self-effacement – must the boundary between body-self and locale be in the creative process of the poet? Poetry, as Paul Valéry noted, partakes of the same language used in everyday discourse (‘ordinary speech’; Valéry, 1958, p. 63) yet to different ends, and if we have established that categories of inside and outside are fallacious, then this is nowhere more so than in respect to language.

If I’m a physical being, with skin and hearing and a way of relating to what I perceive, I’m also a social one. I learnt language, through which I articulate my thought (whether or not I choose to share it with others, in writing or out loud) so very early that I’m unable to remember a time before my engagement with it and thus language – a social, cultural phenomenon – and I – a social, cultural and physical being – are interpenetrated. Indeed, this aspect of language furnishes Mutlu Konuk Blasing with her theory of lyric poetry. Language acquisition is an ‘emotionally charged’ process (2007, p.13) contributing to the formation of individuality in infancy. According to Blasing, ‘The history that [...] personal responses to sounds and rhythms rest on has been “forgotten” by infantile amnesia’ (op. cit., p. 16) but ‘Lyric poetry is a culturally sanctioned discourse that allows us to remember’ (ibid). Hence, presumably, the often highly charged, emotional responses we may have to poetry, for ‘In poetry, there is an uncanny return of the “forgotten”, personally charged material body of language as something at once more strange and more familiar than sense’ (op. cit., p. 48). Language can be said to act upon me as much as I act upon it. It follows then that what we think of as our own, ‘original’ inner thoughts are neither fully our own nor fully ‘original’, as Merleau-Ponty makes clear:

Thought is no 'internal' thing and does not exist independently of the world or of words. What misleads us in this connection, and causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought already constituted and expressed, which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusion of an inner life. But in reality this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner language. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 213)

And of course, that ‘inner’ language is conditioned by our socialization – more than that, it *is* our socialization, as in this statement by Volosinov (or Bakhtin writing as Volosinov; the question of the theorist’s true identity is disputed):

Psychic experience is something inner that becomes outer, and the ideological sign, something outer that becomes inner. The psyche enjoys extraterritorial status in the organism. It is a social entity that penetrates inside the organism of the individual person. (Volosinov, 1973, p. 39)<sup>17</sup>

Linking these two passages is the interpenetration of social and private, of inner and outer, and the way that both of the latter are socially as well as physically constituted. I am soaked in language, I am soaked in ‘ideology’, even (or rather, especially) when I think I speak most separately as an individual. This need not dismay. From this perspective on language, I can be freed of the weighty sense of having to express or escape a ‘self’ when writing. Whatever articulates itself as ‘inner’ thought is breezily indistinct from the play of language ‘out’ in the world and therefore, writing can be seen as more a matter of composing, arranging or editing, rather than of plucking originality from the depths of a ‘self’. Certainly, seeing it this way would also remove the awful sense of responsibility towards the words one chooses, and alleviate the pressure of having to ‘access’ one’s subject matter (to echo, again, Alice Oswald’s statement).

What, then, might be the characteristics of a poetry that – instead of writing about ‘what happens to exist’ and its ‘inaccessibility’ – writes with a happy acknowledgement of the shared nature of its phrases and lines, and an awareness of the reciprocity and reversibility between states of perceiver and perceived? There might be less emphasis upon the ‘original’ thought and utterance of the individual poet, and more interest in compositional strategies of arranging, collaging and/or editing, for example. The final chapter of this study considers just such methods as part of a response in my own drafting

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<sup>17</sup> I’m in accord with Denise Riley, who argues for a broad interpretation of the ideological at this point in Volosinov’s text. It ‘appears to mean the whole world of signs and gestures’ (2005. p. 19) and thus can be applied to language. See footnote 11 (*ibid*) for her discussion of ‘*ideologiya*’.

process to this change in emphasis upon interiority. The second part of this question is that of poetic technique. What might a poem look and sound like in its presentation of an expanded sense of alterity and a more fluid relationship with ‘the others who haunt me and whom I haunt; the “others” along *with* whom I haunt a single, present and actual Being’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 161)? What methods would such poems deploy, and to what effect upon a reader? As indicated earlier, in order to approach such questions, this chapter will consider Michael Haslam’s ‘Old Hall Down in the Hollow: Spring Up Sunny Bank’ (hereafter referred to as ‘Old Hall Down in the Hollow’) from his 2010 collection, *A Cure for Woodness*, not least because – as the collection title suggests – it provides a thematic foil to Alice Oswald’s ‘Woods etc.’ (2005, p.7), examined in Chapter One.

Haslam’s collection demonstrates an expanded concept of what constitutes ‘nature’ and a corresponding humility towards the place of the human. He has, he states,

a problem with ‘Nature’: I can’t conceive of ought that’s, finally, not-Nature. The Internet, Birmingham, The Home Office, The Neocons: none of these are unnatural.’ (2010, p. 17)<sup>18</sup>

In ‘Old Hall Down in the Hollow’ (2010, pp. 31-8), ‘nature’ in its conventional sense appears in abundance. There are ‘ramsons’ and ‘bluebells’, ‘marigold and pink purslane’, ‘lapwing’, ‘plover’ and a plethora of trees (elder, alder, birch, and beech); these are plants and birds named with the specificity found in ‘nature’ writing. There are coppices, a ‘stile’, ‘hayfield’ and vegetables escaped from an old ‘kitchen garden’; these terms speaking of a knowledge of the history of rural management and plant husbandry. There are also terms for ‘natural’ features specific to the area of the Pennines about which Haslam writes; ‘shake hole’, ‘sike’ (this one a specifically Northern English and Scottish term for a small stream), birk (again, a dialect term for birch). But this is not ‘nature’ writing (if indeed ‘Old Hall Down in the Hollow’ *were* to be included in that category) which fetishizes the wild or turns

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<sup>18</sup> It’s interesting to wonder, at this mention of Birmingham, if Haslam is alluding to the work of Roy Fisher – specifically, his two perambulatory pamphlets which observe a wealth of grown, made, managed, ruined and feral aspects of that city’s environment. See Fisher (1961, 1962).

decay into a merely aesthetic experience. Haslam's poem is true to his statement that he 'can't conceive of ought that's, finally, not-Nature', so here indeed are 'bus-stop', 'disused railway steps', 'bottle-bank' and buggies for toddlers.

Haslam's 'Nature' includes also the social and commercial reasons for change, the economic underpinnings that lead to 'redevelopment':

swish partitioning  
of flats, wanting a word that's posher than apartments,  
fetching many grand.

(op. cit., p. 37)

Although the 'shining buggies' that come to 'line the wall' appear as if of their own volition, and are appreciated with the same marvelling curiosity that applies itself to plants and water ('shining'), the poem is clear as to the economics that underpin their appearance: 'the wealth arrives / with newer human beings' and the effect of displacing history, contained in the *genii loci* such as the 'bogey-shade' which 'retracts, retreats'.

Haslam's intense engagement with environment has a pressing motive in that it provides one way in which to counter mental difficulty – for him, 'the woods are the cure for woodness' (op. cit., p.11). This punning on the etymology of 'wood' and its (now archaic) alternative denotation of 'mad' is more than mere word-play, not only because the emotional distress involved in managing such difficulty will not allow it to remain as such. The play on the connotive associations of words as well as their historical roots is a key instance of Haslam's associatively-driven mode of thought manifesting itself as a particular technique. It is not unconnected that this 'cure for woodness' comprises 'birds and mammals, streams and flowers and trees, the web of all living life and the pleroma of physical forces' (op. cit., p. 17), for just as Haslam perceives a 'web' connecting all that lives, so he has conceived of a similar relationship between life, language and writing.

Haslam's 'cure' initially appears close to the Romanticism-derived attitudes that Timothy Morton has criticized in ecologically-aware and 'nature' writing, particularly where a certain sentimentality and idealization sets in as writers bemoan the fragility of 'nature' in

the face of humanity's rapacity.<sup>19</sup> Yet in Haslam's robust defence of his 'natural' solace we can find a modulation that places his 'nature' at a certain remove from those contemporary attitudes criticized by Morton:

I've sometimes read the claim that to find solace in 'Nature' is merely a (Wordsworthian) Romantic affectation. That's bollocks. It's clearly Universal. There are probably good evolutionary reasons for our being enlivened by the beauty of our sustaining ecology. (op. cit., p. 18)

Here, a 'nature' that contains 'humanity de-centred' and offers comfort in the actions of its predators seems more earthy and less sentimental than imagined 'Romantic affectation'. It's worth observing, too, that '(Wordsworthian) Romantic affectation' is a hardened caricature of a range of literary representations against which Haslam refines his own 'nature'. As we'll see in Chapter Three, this is common in discussions of 'nature writing': Robert Macfarlane, for example, executes a similar manoeuvre in his review of *Edgeland*s (2011), attributing neo-pastoral and Romantic attitudes to the authors of the book, in order to throw into relief its failure to offer any alternative to previous views of 'nature'. Although Haslam's seeking of 'solace in "Nature"' might well raise the eyebrows of a reader of Morton's works, this is not 'nature'-as-fragile-and-passive:

And while I was drafting these paragraphs, in a Pennine garden delph, a few yards away from me a sparrowhawk just dived through the rhododendron and snatched the mistle-thrush, on one of her flights from the nest, in a sudden kerfuffle. And before I've revised them, the magpies have had her eggs. It's marvellous how consoling the cruelties of Nature can be. (op. cit., p. 11)

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<sup>19</sup> See for example his 2009 work, *Ecology Without Nature*, where Morton comments at length on one of the later sections of David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997), critiquing its use of immediacy and beauty in its writing as an example of the substitution of aesthetics for argument – or indeed, his discussion of the 'Beautiful Soul', derived from Hegel and applied to a certain ethical stance on environmental matters. (Morton, 2009, pp. 128-9 and 109-123).



‘Nature’ here does indeed have the agency for which Chapter One searched in Oswald’s poem, and it is far from fragile, and far from ‘untouched’. It is a ‘nature’ that bears the signs of human impact. For example, of note here is the ‘rhododendron’; an invasive species introduced into gardens by Victorians and now colonizing many a ‘delph’ in the UK. The mistle-thrush is more likely to be seen in twenty-first century England than the more ‘famous’ song thrush, the latter’s populations having dwindled due to habitat destruction. Furthermore, and paradoxically, this is a ‘nature’ which, although bearing the signs of centuries of human intervention which has contributed to the destruction of parts of ‘nature’ (native species, the song thrush), contains the human individual as just another inhabitant; ‘de-centred’.

This collection continually equates the wood with language and with poetry:

I’ll wander idly among old woods or poetries, sometimes not noticing what’s under my feet, until something, some flower or bird, or word, springs to my attention, and, as it were, cries to be used. (op. cit., p. 7)

The relationship between perceiver and perceived is reciprocal: the ‘natural’ or cultural objects of Haslam’s attention ‘spring’, they do not merely ‘happen to exist’, prior and adjacent to the perceiver, and each one ‘cries’. Not only is there communication, but it is environment, linguistic or physical, which acts upon the inattentive, purposeless wanderer/writer, prompting him to respond.<sup>20</sup> This is the chiasmic relationship envisioned by Merleau-Ponty in action.

That the physical environment *is* a linguistic one is a concept that is reinforced again and again in the collection:

Language is part of Nature: a field of multiple animal choices, made by living wits and animal spirits. The mizzy bents and flaight are truly wet, and so’s the sike riddled shroggs I’ve seen me squelching up. (op. cit., p. 13)

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<sup>20</sup> For equation and comparison of the poem with the walk, see Ammons (1968); Gilbert (1991).

The dialect words are not only the most accurate descriptions of the Pennine landscape's physical features, but – in their consonances of *s* and *t* sounds – are part of the 'living wits' and 'animal spirits' described. These sound repetitions call to and echo each other, rather like a repeated bird call that impresses itself upon a listener. Read aloud, the repeated consonant sounds 'chime' upon the ear; read silently, they still chime residually. In doing so, they appeal to the 'living wits' of our sensory perception. There is more than simply a pleasing parallel between environment-as-subject-matter and the language environment in which the reader finds herself; both are entwined in Haslam's conceptualization. For him, environment comes to him – just as he is present to it – *through* language.

The vigour and energy of this excerpt rests not only on the weave of consonances, but also on the way in which it falls into rhythmic repetition. The last sentence, for example, falls into a pattern of unstressed-stressed syllables it's tempting to scan as a series of iambic feet with an anapaestic variation:

The **miz** | zy **bents** | and **flaigh** | are **tru** | ly **wet**, | and **so's** | the **sike** |  
riddled **shroggs** | I've **seen** | me **squel** | ching **up**.

Both consonance and rhythmic drive give the effect not just of energy but of spontaneity, of an outpouring of responsive language that staggers through the 'sike riddled shroggs' and increases in sibilance, becoming 'truly wet'. As indicated, it's more than that. Haslam's energy and apparent spontaneity (to which effect his associative diction choice and intensifying of punning and rhyme also contribute) are very deliberately the techniques produced by the author's orientation towards language as an environment, and language in environment; a response to experience as a physical being. Linguistic and physical being are in chiasmic relation and neither can be grasped without the other. Furthermore, they are the product of an aesthetic and linguistic theory which has developed alongside the creative process:

There is a field, a wood, a forestful of words, and one can scribble among them, even say things with them. They can be arranged, to export some obscure

importance. My glad youth discovered what he called ‘a languescape’, which was only the wood of words. The field was there without him; it might divulge something about The Mind, but it manifested in Poetry. (op. cit., pp. 14-15)

Although the ‘languescape project’ (op. cit., p. 17) was part of a movement towards the abstract away from which Haslam has since moved, it is significant that this ‘languescape’ is a language terrain; that it lies close in sound to the word ‘landscape’. *A Cure for Woodness* demonstrates a strong sense of an linguistic environment experienced as a physical one, as well as a sense of the intertwining of interiority with environment – whether that consists of plants, land features, animals, ghosts, buildings or bus stops. For Haslam, socio-cultural histories, personal circumstance and reflection intertwine with the human-impacted landscape before him. He appears to co-opt environment as one element of the poems’ thought patterns, although – in view of his vision of a ‘nature’ with ‘humanity de-centred’ – ‘co-opt’ is possibly too ‘masterly’ a term. His work is as clear an example of Denise Riley’s most recent descriptions of language and affect as I can find:

A speaker might imagine herself threaded through by language, as if a ribbon were pierced with eyelets; she might feel herself gathered and folded, drawn up in pleats by words. (2014, p. 3)

As we will see shortly in one of the longer poems in the collection, thought truly is ‘no internal thing’ and interiority truly ‘does not exist independently of the world or of words’ – to recall and adapt Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 213). The fluid interiority evident in *A Cure for Woodness* both threads through and is threaded through with its environment – which is also its language, which is also its environment and so on.

This fluidity is concomitant with a certain slipperiness in the way the poetry presents its subject matter. This can be seen abundantly in ‘Old Hall Down in the Hollow’, on which we will now focus fully for the remainder of this chapter. To begin with, there is significant slippage of time between seasons, times of day, months. Although the decay of the abandoned building occurs over a succession of years, the poem’s opening offers a speeded-up decline, as the lines proceed in quick succession:

The purlins rot, the rafters drop a weight of slate.  
 Creepers assume the mistal stalls.  
 Wind and frost'll finish off the walls.  
 A colony of rodents holds the floor.

(Haslam, 2010, p. 31)

The strongly iambic rhythm of these lines bears the reader along swiftly and the end-stopping increases the sense that this is a list of processes accomplished in short order. Past ('The hall stood empty in the hollow now for years'), present and future (the eventual accomplishment of wind and frost erosion) are pulled close together. Time is 'now for years'; proceeding, yes, but rather like a stream of water, now halting in a pool – as where the present ('now') can stretch and simply continue ('for years') – now rapidly traversing rocks, as when 'The fabrication falls / through the decades without repair' at lines twelve to thirteen. Those decades, condensed into one line, occur swiftly, simultaneously, and just as the eye 'falls' from the end of line twelve to the beginning of line thirteen, so does the structure described. There's a way in which the poem *is* the hall, which is grown *and* manmade and which appears here in all its incarnations as it has been over the years. This 'fabrication' – the poem's own artifice – may fall, inasmuch as it proceeds for the reader down the page, but it does not fail, if to fail is to decompose so thoroughly as to no longer exist as verse.

In the botanically-precise but common names for plants, the proliferation of image based on precise sensory detail, the poem seems to invite the reader to look outside it. Yet just as we're about to settle into thinking that there *is* an external referent, perhaps a 'real' Old Hall somewhere near Foster Clough, the poem points us back inside itself. We're warned early on in the poem that it will mis- or re-direct us in this way:

It's fictional, vestigial, Symbolic Hall.  
 Only the spate-spill down the hill, eroding silicates  
 of coal and shale is real.

(op. cit., p. 31)

If the residue of industrial activity, the weathered geology of the area is ‘real’ and the ruined building is not, what are we to make of the slates and rafters, the porch? Furthermore, what are we to make of the ‘boggarts’ and detumescing ghosts, or of April? In this poem, it is neither possible nor desirable to say what is ‘really’ there at Old Hall, especially if the ‘earth-movers’ and new flats, the collapsing roof, the ‘evicted spooks’ are all present, simultaneously. We have our way through this poem’s indeterminate, shifting environment.

This uncertain oscillation is intensified by the way in which our guide so seldom self-identifies. There are comparatively few instances of ‘I’ in the poem, and when it does appear, it isn’t completely deictically stable, or rather, it appears deictically stable only very briefly. Haslam’s poem takes advantage of a characteristic of pronomial use charted by Emile Benveniste; the way in which every individual instance of ‘I’ has its own reference and corresponds each time to a unique being who is set up as such’ (1971, p. 218). It is against this characteristic that Oswald’s ‘Woods etc.’ strains in favour of deictic stability, and which her poem’s use of the second person opens up despite itself – and it is this very same feature we find in Haslam’s poem to such striking effect. ‘Old Hall Down in the Hollow’ actively exploits ‘[the] fact that these “pronomial” forms do not refer to “reality” or to “objective” positions in space or time but to the utterance, unique each time, that contains them’ (op. cit., p. 219). As this excerpted statement suggests, with its emphasis on the uselessness of references to ‘reality’ or ‘objectivity’, it is as much the difference between philosophical understandings as pronomial deployment that distinguishes Haslam’s work from that of Oswald.

In fact, the first ‘I’ doesn’t occur until page thirty-three, at line fifty-six, by which time the reader has encountered a cast of other characters including ‘a woman in her nightwear’, ‘rodents’, ‘rook’, ‘The elder elves’, a ‘boggart’ ‘with a chip upon its shoulder’, the aforementioned ‘line of ghouls’, ‘another April’ and ‘something nibbling at the well’. It is that ‘something feeding there’ (a small animal, unable to jump a fence?) which the ‘I’ lets out of the gate. But the scenario isn’t stable:

There’s something feeding there. It could be supernatural,  
or something suppering on stagnating emotional  
or other suffering. I let it out

down by the wicket gate with the evicted spooks

[...]

Then I pack it in

a trunk of props.

(Haslam, 2010, p. 33)

The stanza break ensures doubt; is it an entity, however spectral or allegorical, or does the 'I' give voice in some way to 'stagnating emotional / or other suffering' ('I let it out')? As the reader's eye moves down to the wicket gate, this flicker of instability is resolved, only to reappear at the first of several disavowals offered by the poem: 'I pack it in/a trunk of props'. Here the 'I' is the co-ordinator of the poem's effects, and this reader for one feels a little foolish for having participated so readily in imagining a 'real' persona, with 'real' 'spooks' and a 'real' gate.

The way in which 'I' attaches itself so fluidly to verbs in a variety of tenses further destabilizes the deictic centres that build and then decay, rather like Old Hall itself. Thus, after the present tense of 'I pack' at line sixty-one (ibid), the poem switches rapidly between past and present:

I came back to the bar to find it emptier  
 than it ever were before. I must address myself  
 the solitary auditor, my own report. I needn't shout.

I cut down oak-wood steps, round by  
 Old Hall and down the disused railway steps  
 to where the bus-stop is and out.

(ibid)

The poem is simultaneously in the past ('I came back') the present ('I must') and the future (given the way in which modal verbs such as 'must' project the verb's subject forward into the future). The 'I' is in the bar, talking to himself – or the 'I' is commenting on itself, a poem that has no way of knowing if anyone else is listening. Following such oscillation between mimesis and reflexivity (and so rapidly, all in three lines), 'I cut' presents

a certain ambiguity of tense, since the verb in this form can function as past and present. This is only resolved once another verb appears ('is'). This sliding in and out of past and present, this slipperiness of the 'I' in and out of a firmly delineated situation and into self-reflexivity is thus a subtle but nonetheless important technique in unsettling the reader.

This slipperiness is intensified by the eruption of the differing 'voices' out of the verse. For example, after many stanzas of observation, personal recollection and the eventual appearance of 'I', a stanza admonishing 'ye scholars schooling us' erupts (op. cit., p. 35) – only to be immediately countered in the following stanza in a blistering retort. These stanzas exemplify another quality of Haslam's poem: its reflexivity. 'Old Hall Down in the Hollow' is riddled with an ironic awareness of its own status as a poetic text, and this awareness is often uneasy about its own value as well as about its attempts to represent its subject matter.

The most striking feature where this can be seen is in the associative word play and intense, alliterative and rhyming qualities of the verse – which are so intense as to draw attention to themselves heavily. In the stanza just discussed, even as the 'scholars' roundly trounce its compositor for such 'infantile fancy' and 'frothing at the mouth in rhyme', they do so in exactly the way critiqued:

You have over-egged the pudding up the English rough.  
 Juggling and giggling and jiggling and gurgling mean  
     next to nothing. Readers have read enough.  
 Please try to write more seriously stiff and thoughtful stuff.  
 You only bluff your edging precipice with guff.  
 You overplay the clown. Infantile fancy makes you mime  
 the peewits' tune. The real green plovers piping  
 up and down the bank's field ground complain.  
     Real poetry is tough.  
 Yours is a frothing at the mouth in rhyme.

(ibid)

Consider the monosyllabic rhyming and half-rhyming that tracks through from 'rough' to 'noth(ing)', '(e)nough', 'stiff', 'stuff', 'bluff', 'guff', 'tough' and 'froth (ing)'. The

casual register of these words is ironic, used as they are to further an argument that the poem isn't serious or sophisticated enough. It is also interesting that this section's use of the present continuous ('Juggling and giggling and jiggling and gurgling') echoes a much earlier poem; Robert Southey's 'The Cataract of Lodore' (Southey, 1838). Given that Southey's poetic reputation has historically been questioned,<sup>21</sup> this glancing, oblique reference in Haslam's poem is pleasingly ironic. This is further evidence of self-reference and a playful foregrounding of artifice, in keeping with the slipperiness previously noted.

The use of sound to associatively suggest meaning is a key technique of this poem, and all-of-a-piece with Haslam's concept of 'a field, a wood [...] of words [...] manifested in Poetry' (Haslam, 2010, pp. 14-15). Consequently, it's no surprise to find a striking example of what Garrett Stewart discusses in *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Stewart 1990). The words comprising line 116 run into each other when read aloud: '*pluvia, a pluvial, a pluviala*' (op. cit., p. 35). If we accept that the comma after '*pluvia*' can be heard in retrospect as an unvocalised / sound, the line is redivided by the ear into an imperfect repetition of one word: *pluviala*. In its initial stumble over the word to be repeated, the line also therefore performs the spontaneous imperfections and self-corrections of speech. The effect is dependent too upon whether or not a reader exaggerates or passes over the second comma, yet even to the eye this punctuation mark offers little resistance, especially as the imperative of the rhythmic pace encourages a faster reading. This is more than merely diverting in its demonstration of Stewart's thesis, however. The technique of composing-by-sound is distinctive of Haslam's poetic mode of thought and contributes to that mobile and permeable interiority already discussed.

There are few places where the poem presents this interiority as distinctly and discretely attached to the 'I'. This is because, in a sense, interiority is everywhere; it has turned inside-out to become of a piece with the responsive environment. Consider:

I saw April shining naked in a shower,  
peering through a pair of glasses from a shake-hole

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<sup>21</sup> And more recent readers haven't been all that sure, either: 'This may not be first-rate poetry' (Higgins, 1985, p. 47). For a brief survey of opinion from Southey's contemporaries and of his posthumous reputation, see Burke (2011, pp. 63-76).



on the heath, or I'd been scrambled on a ferrous  
 landslip, down the dip. Lights extinguished just as if  
 I had got strangled by the throat at dusk.

It must have been some ghastly private tangle,  
 getting stuck in clay and clam,

with ewe and ewer, avenue  
 and Anglican and yew, with tup and stopper,  
 ram and lamb and udder-dam, with shaggy wether,  
 shit and slit, with cleft and quick to get it up  
 and mix with bluebells, ramsons, doe and buck.

(op. cit., p. 34)

There is that familiar uncertainty of reference; is April a month or a woman? Is she in a bathroom shower or a shower of rain – or has the 'I' been caught by some rain? The following line perpetuates the uncertainty; it is not clear initially from the grammatical construction whether it is the 'I' 'peering through a pair of glasses' or not – although this becomes the most likely meaning at 'or' in the following line. At lines ninety to ninety-one the 'I' truly is 'strangled', not to appear again. Instead, there follows a description of an experience which seems partly sexual, partly to do with being lost and 'stuck', in which the rhyming and sound associations run the reader dizzily through an Anglican churchyard ('avenue / and Anglican and yew') to the mating and breeding of sheep ('ram and lamb and udder-dam, with shaggy wether, / shit and slit with cleft') to this:

shit and slit with cleft and quick to get it up  
 and mix with bluebells, ramsons, doe and buck.

(ibid)

Several of the poems in *A Cure for Woodness* seem haunted by anxieties about male impotence and a corresponding fascination with the male erection, but that's not what is most interesting about this extract. Rather, it is the extraordinary lack of protagonist attached to such a strongly emotional and sexual experience. The 'I' has long disappeared;

who is ‘quick to get it up’? Who mixes with the spring flowers and the deer? The experience is diffuse, generalized, everywhere.

‘Old Hall down in the Hollow’ contains much that suggests that it could be read as a modulation upon pastoral. Certainly the poem signals its pastoral heritage, with, for example, the introduction of April, who functions as a month, a love-partner, a fleeing woman, a naked nymph and who, along with the milkmaids ripe for ‘plucking’ ‘from the ditch’, present the generic female characters often found in texts from the tradition. We might also hazard a connection between Virgil’s dispossessed farmer of the *Eclogues* who has had to make way for veterans of the recent civil war (rewarded with acres of already-managed land), and Haslam’s dispossessed boggarts and spirits and the ‘one’ who lays an affectionate hand on the sandstone wall of Old Hall, shortly before it is redeveloped as apartments. The following chapter considers the pastoral as a mode that can critique and illuminate the power relations underpinning rural lives and landscapes; reflexively, playfully and above all ironically creating a gap between the idyll (literally) it portrays and its own artifice and in doing so, throwing light on the disjuncts in culture’s relationship to ‘nature’. Haslam’s poem shares that ironic reflexivity with pastoral; it too throws its own artifice into relief, but, as discussed, this is part of a larger project; a philosophy of language and ‘nature’ in which the two are intertwined, and through which chiasmic relation the poet comes to know the world.

This chapter has argued that the creative process and the flux between inside and outside (or oscillation between perceiver and perceived, to recall Merleau-Ponty) is particularly charged and active during creative work. Haslam’s poem can be read to a degree as an account of that process, where thinking and composing verse occur simultaneously with observing and encountering and walking and perceiving, via a mode of thought specific to poetry, in ‘a continual song of being here’ (Haslam, 2015).

### Chapter Three

#### Writing 'Nature'

Having examined some philosophical bases from which poetry might demonstrate an expanded sense of both interiority and 'nature', this study will now consider more closely the latter's presentation. As James Wilkes notes in the introduction to his study of writing and landscape, 'nature writing' is experiencing a contemporary efflorescence, and it is interesting to consider how the 'new nature writing' (2014, p. 3) intersects with other, contemporary forms of writing about environment such as ecocriticism as well as longer-established aesthetic and literary traditions such as the picturesque, sublime and, most significantly for this study, pastoral. What, if anything, chimes in these constructions of 'nature' with the interiorities preferred in Chapter Two?

The first section of this chapter considers a book of essays, written collaboratively by two poets; Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, against an appreciative but still sharply critical review of it by Robert Macfarlane, himself an exponent of 'new nature writing'.<sup>22</sup> I examine features of its relatedness to the aforementioned literary and artistic movements in order to uncover some aspects of contemporary constructs of 'nature'. The second part of the chapter takes up the critical thinking of Kathleen Jamie and Timothy Morton and develops further the concept of the feral as a way of approaching the nuanced 'nature' they propose. This example of a 'threshold' state, which I connect to Morton's 'queer ecology', provides support for the possibility of a critical and creative dialectic which might enable a text to productively present interiority as a mutable, permeable phenomenon in constant relationship with environment.

#### *'A Kind of Arcadia': Edgelands, Pastoral and the Picturesque*

*Edgelands'* subtitle (*Journeys into England's True Wilderness*) both signals the territory and suggests why Macfarlane, himself noted for writing in relation to wildness and landscape<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Farley and Symmons Roberts (2012); Macfarlane (2011).

<sup>23</sup> See for example: Macfarlane (2003, 2007, 2012); Donwood, Macfarlane and Richards (2013).

might not produce a wholly approving review. With the inclusion of such a value-laden term as ‘true’, discourses around authenticity and writing are already being triggered. In such discourses, bearing witness to first-hand experience and the veracity of testimony is a criterion against which the text’s value is judged. If the experience is not first-hand, or deemed in some way not to be ‘true’, then the text fails.<sup>24</sup> In ‘nature’ writing, such discourses might express themselves through competing claims about visits to the ‘wildest’ terrain, or perhaps through attempts at the most ‘sensitive’ encounter. Bearing this in mind, for Farley and Symmons Roberts to harness the word ‘true’ to the culturally- and emotionally-freighted ‘wilderness’ is tantamount to a challenge – a challenge which is repeated in the introductory chapter:

At their most unruly and chaotic, edgelands make a great deal of our official wilderness seem like the enshrined, ecologically arrested, controlled garden space it really is.’ (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012, p. 8)

In this extract, ‘Wild’ and ‘managed’ are pitted against each other in the assumption that there can be such an opposition. Although the categories are deftly twisted and inverted (the borders of cities, those most human of places are wild, here; places such as the national parks, presumably the ‘official wilderness’ the authors decry, are emphatically not), the discourses with which they are meshed are left in place. Thus, the qualities of wildness (‘unruly’, ‘chaotic’) are detached from the ‘official’ wild; indeed sharply opposed to it, without dislodging the notion of wildness as somehow more authentic than the managed. Consider that string of adjectives: for example, ‘enshrined’, with its suggestion of misplaced piety; ‘arrested’, which taps into the discourse of ‘progress’ and, twinned with ‘ecologically’, manages to suggest that managing these environments is harming them *and* the Environment at large. In this literary universe, a garden is not a delightful place in which to find oneself ‘stumbling on melons’ (Marvell, 1992, p. 475) or experiencing transformation

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<sup>24</sup> A notable example of this is Oprah Winfrey’s reaction to the revelation that James Frey’s memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* (2004) – a book she had previously lauded for its unflinching account of addiction and recovery – had exaggerated and invented aspects of the narrative. See Anonymous (2006), *Oprah’s questions for James* (2006).

via a ‘green thought’ (ibid), but a place to be scorned, since it is ‘controlled’, ‘official’ and therefore undesirable. Furthermore, the very places that Macfarlane visits in his own writing (for example, in Macfarlane, 2007) are rebuked in their simulation of the wild and categorised firmly as inauthentic, emphatically not ‘true wild’. So it’s perhaps unsurprising that, although he is quick to acknowledge what he admires of it – ‘At its best, this book is a delight: witty and wryly contrarian.’ (Macfarlane, 2011, p. 8) – his criticisms of *Edgelands* are strong, and often conveyed satirically. For example:

So off they wandered, to the brinks of mostly northern English cities, returning with their post-pastoral harvest of prose. The book takes the form of 28 essays, each treating a charismatic aspect of the edgelands – "Cars", "Canals", "Ruins", "Mines", "Hotels", "Sewage" – and each a spray-can squirt in the eyes of the National Trust. The authors' political aim is explicit and harped upon: to chastise the "routine prejudices" that we hold with regard to landscapes. Well, they succeed in that, but they also install replacement biases and nostalgias of their own.

(ibid)

It’s worth pointing out that – as this chapter is discovering – Macfarlane’s latter point stands: the very categories which Farley and Symmons Roberts purport to challenge are not dislodged. Yet hovering over both review and book is a particularly contemporary anxiety which places in opposition notions of the authentic and the counterfeit. In the rhetoric of *Edgelands*, these are aligned, respectively, with concepts of wildness and tameness, and although Macfarlane does not appear to challenge Farley and Symmons Roberts for their claims about the new ‘wildness’, he certainly takes their text to task on grounds of authenticity, and with some justification. In doing so, he aligns *Edgelands* pejoratively with both the pastoral and a ‘traditional romantic’ sensibility. This manoeuvre has its problems, not least because of the conflation of two distinct literary traditions and their characteristics.

However, if the use of pastoral as shorthand for some of the book’s failings is a convenient but overly simplifying strategy, it also opens up an interesting range of questions about the ways in which *Edgelands* might modulate or speak to pastoral’s concerns. Consider the first sentence of the excerpt quoted above: ‘So off they wandered,

to the brinks of mostly northern English cities, returning with their post-pastoral harvest of prose' (ibid). Here, Macfarlane is strongly signalling the pastoral connection and not only in the use of 'harvest' and 'post-pastoral'. In this excerpt's emphasis upon retreat to and return from 'the brinks', two key pastoral themes are introduced; retreat and return (usually presented as from and to the 'worldly' concerns of court and/or town).<sup>25</sup> How, though, might retreat work, when it finds its end point not in a barely-populated glade or fields of ripening crops, but in a residential area, an underpass or retail park? What transformative experience might be brought back from the edgelands upon the visitor's return?

Macfarlane is uninterested in such questions, overlooking the modulations that might occur in 'post-pastoral' writing in favour of deploying the label as shorthand for the book's failings. We might, however, look to *Edgelands* for such answers. His alignment of *Edgelands* with pastoral may be intended negatively, but it raises the interesting question of how strongly *Edgelands* can be read as a twenty-first century pastoral variant. As indicated, there are other modes of writing environment with which the book intersects, but pastoral is perhaps the most significant, not least because Farley and Symmons Roberts themselves allude to its relevance.

Like 'lyric', 'pastoral' is a much-used term, carrying a set of assumptions that are not always carefully examined – we only have to return to Macfarlane's review to see that – so it's worth pausing to consider which pastoral aspects one might seek in *Edgelands*. At one point in Paul Alpers' study, *What is Pastoral?*, a list is provided: 'idyllic landscape, landscape as a setting for song, an atmosphere of *otium*, a conscious attention to art and nature, herdsmen as singers, and ... herdsmen as herdsmen.' (1996, p. 22) *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* is less specific, but it might be interesting to judge whether *Edgelands* meets this part of the definition: 'its ends are sometimes sentimental and romantic, but sometimes satirical or political' (Congleton and Brogan, 1993, p. 885).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapters Three and Four of Gifford (1999) for a survey and discussion of these concepts in pastoral.

<sup>26</sup> Congleton and Brogan's full definition runs as follows:

The pastoral is a fictionalized imitation of rural life, usually the life of an imaginary Golden Age, in which the loves of shepherds and shepherdesses play a prominent

Cuddon's emphasis on pastoral's 'nostalgia for the past' and its 'search for the simple life away from the court and town' (1992, p. 689) are also productive themes to consider.<sup>27</sup>

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part; its ends are sometimes sentimental and romantic, but sometimes satirical or political. To insist on a realistic presentation of actual shepherd life would exclude the greater part of the works that are called pastoral. Only when poetry ceases to imitate actual rural life does it become distinctly pastoral. It must be admitted, however, that the term has been and still is used loosely to designate any treatment of rural life. (1993, p. 885)

That question of how closely a text 'imitate[s] actual rural life' is one which is key not only to Macfarlane's criticism of *Edgelands* but also to the shortcomings of basing any attempt at writing environment upon the discourses of authenticity. I take up this issue later, while discussing Farley and Symmons Roberts's presentation of the edgelands' inhabitants.

<sup>27</sup> Cuddon's emphasis is also heavier upon the reflexive and satirical possibilities afforded pastoral :

Fundamentally, this is what pastoral is about: it displays a nostalgia for the past, for some hypothetical state of love and peace which has somehow been lost. The dominating idea and theme of most pastoral is the search for the simple life away from the court and town, away from corruption, war, strife, the love of gain, away from "getting and spending". (Cuddon, 1992, p. 689)

This possibility is implicit in the contrast between that 'simple life' and the life from which it is a retreat. It's intriguing to consider how that might function in a text which retreats to the edgelands, which might be considered not as a place of retreat but as an extension of the life of the city. However, this is to pre-empt one of the chief problems with pastoral – and with *Edgelands* – if one is to cling to notions of 'true' wilderness and 'authentic' accounts of landscapes.

With these definitions in mind, we might look for the following: a sense of *otium*, which this study takes to mean the representation of leisure or the suspension of time or of the imperatives of usual life; the idyllic landscape, closely allied to nostalgia and a sense of loss; representations of the lives of *Edgelands'* workers and inhabitants and lastly, some way in which pastoral singing or the art of writing is considered (bearing in mind the literary linking of shepherds and poets). In connection with that reflexivity, we might also look for an awareness of the ironies of pastoral representation, and the satirical opportunities it makes available.

Despite its lack of sylvan glades and the descriptions instead of wrecked car yards and shipping containers, *Edgelands* is an idyll, and a nostalgic one at that. In fact, Farley and Symmons Roberts have at least half an eye upon the pastoral texts in which these qualities appear, and engage directly with the notion of idylls and their unrelatedness to everyday life. Thus, when describing the half-wild, half-domesticated, post-industrial landscapes in which they grew up: 'We remembered a kind of Arcadia' (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012, p. 7). Remembered and therefore shifting in composition, this is the necessarily nostalgic landscape of childhood, of 'back lanes or waste ground, [...] wooded perimeters of a golf course, an old path leading through scratchy shrubland, or the course of a drainage ditch [...] the track bed of a dismantled railway [...] an abandoned quarry' where 'it was easy enough to walk for a short while and soon find yourself lost' (op. cit., p. 2). They could so easily have been lost and frightened, rather than lost and delighted in these disregarded places ('back lanes', 'old path', 'dismantled', 'abandoned'), but this disorientation is presented as productive and exciting, perhaps in the tradition of the explorers that Macfarlane writes about in *Mountains of the Mind* (2003) – or of the Grand Tours of the long eighteenth century, to which we shall turn, presently.

This description of the landscape in which they remember finding – losing – themselves (or maybe finding other selves in) carries with it that very sense of *otium* for which the pastoral text is notable; a pleasant suspension of one's everyday activities, in a hidden place where you, too, are hidden. So far, so very pastoral. Yet the authors explicitly contrast their edgelands with a more popular and widely-accepted pastoral landscape; a countryside with which Macfarlane too might take issue:



But none of this ever really felt like the countryside: the sunlit uplands of jigsaw puzzles and Ladybird books, the rolling hills of biscuit-tin lids, the meadowlands and glades in the framed, reproduced pastorals our parents hung on our living-room walls or that we saw on television or read about. (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012, p. 2)

Notice the diction choices: ‘sunlit uplands’ and ‘rolling hills’ are clichés to be found contemporarily in advertising copy, but their pairing with ‘glades’ and the explicit mention of ‘pastorals’ signals awareness of the literary heritage of such diction. They use such familiar phrases in order to further reinforce their argument that the ‘true wilderness’ is not what we commonly think of – and what Robert Macfarlane has written about – as countryside or nature or even wild. Here, the pastoral scene is contained in texts and images which refer to a landscape that has never been encountered at first hand. Its inauthenticity is further underlined by its framing and reproduction. It can only be found as part of the puzzles, books, lids, frames, television which populate the home. The connectives in this passage (‘of’, ‘in’) create puzzles and books and lids as landscapes themselves. Just as the national parks are framed, being ‘controlled’, ‘managed’ and thereby rendered less real as wild places, so are these *loci amoeni*.

That term appears in the text itself where the authors engage directly with concepts of the pastoral. For Farley and Symmons Roberts, the ‘idea of the *locus amoenus* – the place of element and balanced climate favoured by the gods themselves – has haunted the way English landscape has been viewed.’ (op. cit., p. 102) It is interesting that the authors discuss this concept in a chapter entitled ‘Gardens’, since the garden and its historically-specific design has often been brought into play in arguments against the value of pastoral. Here, the authors are not de-valuing pastoral, but attempting to reposition our sense of it – away from the mountains or woods about which a writer like Macfarlane might choose to write and into, over ‘the *Edgelands*, where our slipstream has created a zone of inattention’ (op. cit., p. 103):

The English landscape most of us pass through now is a landscape of speed and displacement. The Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks might be our destinations, and these are managed, georgic places, where much hard work

and effort maintains an ecological balance. However, true pastoral is more likely to be found in the edgelands [...] (ibid)

Again, there is that discourse of authenticity. Here, ‘true wilderness’ is pastoral, but it’s a hidden one, passed over in favour of the ‘true’ garden, the ‘fake’ wildernesses that pastiche ‘true pastoral’ poorly; the ‘managed, georgic’ ‘Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty’, sites of ‘much hard work and effort’ by those overlooked workers whose grinding toil makes possible pleasant sojourn in and profit from the countryside.<sup>28</sup> This pastoral assertion has a certain irony, since the landscape of traditional pastoral, the woods bordered by fields of crops and populated by shepherds and cowherds, milkmaids and threshers, is also supremely managed land. Yet here, pastoral has shifted, is unmanaged, neglected even. The ‘zone of inattention’ provides the authors and readers of their book with a place of suspension, in the ‘slipstream’ of everyone else’s movement; it is the pastoral retreat to which the frazzled city-dweller can retire. Except that, of course, it is also an extension of the city – and not just geographically. It is bound economically to the city – just as more traditionally rural environment is and was – and worked and inhabited by people who may be surprised to learn that they live in a ‘zone of inattention’.

The paradoxical enfolding and place-swapping of ‘wild’ and ‘managed’ is one of the most intriguing features of Farley and Symmons Roberts’ writing about environment and the individual’s relationship to it. Although it doesn’t achieve an escape from such categories, in its modulations upon the pastoral and upon nature-writing it does at least point towards their dismantling. It is to the ecocritical provocations of Timothy Morton that we must turn later in this chapter for a re-casting of the construct of ‘nature’.

To return to *Edgelands*’ pastoral-ness. One of the criticisms to which pastoral has been particularly vulnerable is that its depiction of rural lives is idealized, conventional and unconvincing – and we find that criticism revived in Macfarlane’s review. Here the lives in question are not those of shepherds or farmers, nor even the agricultural workers or travellers that populate the *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1992), but business park receptionists and car-racing teens, and Macfarlane argues that there are few

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<sup>28</sup> Raymond Williams’ historical investigation into rural workers’ lives and labour (not to mention exploitation) in *The Country and the City* (1993) springs to mind, here.

representations of such people, and those that appear are not represented fairly. Certainly, he discovers and reprimands an example of stereotyping in a description of ‘binman’s nose’ and a ‘patronising’ account of a conversation with a receptionist (2011).<sup>29</sup> At this point in Macfarlane’s assessment, a reading of *Edgelands* in the light of pastoral and its conventions could have been helpful, for an assumption often made about pastoral is that it glosses over the difficulties of rural workers’ lives. This is not necessarily based on truth; as I’ve already pointed out, in such a pastoral cornerstone as Virgil’s *Eclogues* (1963), one of the speakers has been dispossessed of his livelihood and the landscape in which he worked, since it has now been given over to veterans returning from war.<sup>30</sup> His dispossession wouldn’t be out of place in Raymond Williams’ account of the economic relations masked by images of green fields and woods (Williams, 1993). Furthermore, as Alpers shows, using Empson’s assertion that pastoral ‘“put[s] the complex into the simple”’ (1996, p. 41), where stylization does occur, pastoral makes room for an acknowledgement of the limits of its representations. For Alpers (following Empson), ‘the pastoral process is not called into question by reality as we know it, nor is it to be expected to transcend or transform it’ yet it remains a valid form because ‘it includes the self-conscious and critical’ (ibid). This is the constitutional irony that imbues pastoral, but Macfarlane’s attachment to authenticity ensures he misses the opportunity to read *Edgelands* this way.

Yet the book itself departs from the pastoral in its claim that it presents the ‘truth’ about the chosen environment; it too is attached to the discourse of authenticity. This attachment ensures that the criticisms that do not apply to pastoral must apply to *Edgelands*. Despite their claims to show the ‘true wilderness’, those brief encounters with its inhabitants are deployed only in order to demonstrate the idiosyncratic authenticity of the authors’ explorations. Farley and Symmons Roberts decline to investigate or report on the experiences of the edgelands’ denizens any further; in this they do not even go as far as pastoral. Without this or an acknowledgement of the limits of their pastoral, their claim to authenticity is weakened and Macfarlane’s judgement stands.

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<sup>29</sup> The passages referred to by Macfarlane can be found in Farley and Symmons Roberts, (2012), p. 59 and pp. 197-8.

<sup>30</sup> See Alpers (1996, p. 24 and pp. 161-2).

It might be argued, in defence, that in their heavier emphasis upon the landscape of the edgelands, Farley and Symmons Roberts make no claims that might, for example, suggest they are on a mission such as that of *Lyrical Ballads* to depict, in their reported encounters with the edgelands inhabitants, the ‘language really used by men’ (Wordsworth, 2001). Yet in that emphasis on the landscape and its aesthetics – a landscape which, just like the ‘official wildernesses’ they disdain, will be peopled – something suspect is at work. It is the same, suspect impulse that Kathleen Jamie identifies in Macfarlane’s own writing and which underlies ‘ruin porn’ and the picturesque, and which entails certain elisions in its representations of environment. Ironically, Macfarlane himself highlights a crucial aspect of this elision in his tart response to the authors’ claim that ‘Container yards are places of beauty and mystery’ (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012, p. 49): ‘Well, perhaps, but they are also places of crushed fingers and low wages’ (Macfarlane, 2011).

With their hermits and beekeepers and pretty ruins of supermarkets, Farley and Symmons Roberts certainly show alignment with the aesthetic values of the long eighteenth century, specifically the passion for viewing real landscapes as art – and for transforming gardens into imitations of those places. I’m thinking here of grottos, follies and hahas, of country estates installing ‘hermits’ in constructed caves, of Claude glasses and mirrors that showed the outside world in a more flattering light than a glance would do, and which certain classes carried around with them on their walking tours of the Lake District or the Swiss Alps, in order to transform an arduous trek up a hill into an aesthetic experience.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Also recalled are the debates around ‘the ratio of art to nature’ (Marshall, 1997, p. 710) that attended the new ideas in eighteenth century garden and landscape design. For example, Sir Uvedale Price’s criticism of the landscape design of ‘Capability Brown’ seems remarkably close an echo of Macfarlane’s point about Farley and Symmons Roberts and their ‘new’ wildernesses. Compare:

‘while Mr. Brown was removing old pieces of formality, he was establishing new ones of a more extensive consequence’ (Price, 1810, p.37, excerpted in Marshall, 1997, p. 710.)

with:

We might also look to the Grand Tour, where the young people of those classes travelled to agreeably ‘other’ locations, to be instructed by ruins and moved by vistas. The vistas may be a sweep of motorway junction, the ruins may be an abandoned warehouse, but the picturesque and Romantic sublime of *Edgelands*’ tour is palpable.

Such optical devices as the Claude glass can’t help but recall contemporary phenomena such as Instagram, where filters and artful cropping can render the most everyday of object into a thing of beauty. These techniques amongst others, as well as the effects of time upon untended buildings and manmade objects, are, of course, also the province of ‘ruin porn’ photographers. The photographers of Detroit’s uninhabited houses and deserted, decommissioned factories are often criticized for ignoring or making merely beautiful the social and personal devastations that followed the collapse of the car manufacturing industry there.<sup>32</sup> The ethical questionability of such portrayals – of any such portrayals – is encapsulated in a comment by the Detroit citizen who exclaimed ‘Who are we, the animals in the park?’<sup>33</sup> We should not complacently consider this a phenomenon solely pertaining to the United States, for – quite apart from the examples found in *Edgelands* – it has a history in the United Kingdom too. It is the impulse that enables Iain Sinclair, in his avowedly counter-cultural walk around the perimeter provided by the M25 to describe ‘a stream of Harold Wooders rushing downhill, screeching into their cellphones’ as ‘pale, soapy, razor-raw. [...] [Heels and halloween slap’ (2003, p. 520). (One can’t help

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In the end, the thought-crimes of which Farley and Symmons Roberts accuse traditional landscape romantics (the editing out of particular people, the excesses of the lyric impulse) get re-performed almost perfectly here, just in a new setting’ (Macfarlane, 2011)

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Leary (2011) and Millington (2013) for an analysis of the discourse of representations of Detroit, USA. It is from criticism of those representations – most often by residents of Detroit – that the term ‘ruin porn’ has been taken and more generally adopted.

<sup>33</sup> For a fuller description of the encounter that provoked this response, see Millington (2013, pp. 279-96, p. 284 and footnote 3).

suspecting this unsympathetic view might have been fuelled by the fact that he and his travelling companions couldn't find anywhere that would serve them a meal). The distancing effect of the aesthetic enables his bile to aim at its target assuming a blithe impunity. The residents and landscape are there to serve the discerning eye and stomach of the traveller – just as they were in the long eighteenth century, when the picturesque reigned, and just as they are in some examples of 'new nature writing' in which a 'lone, enraptured male' reports back on his reverent encounters with the natural world (Jamie, 2008).

Such an impulse provoked a response in the work of Patrick Wright (2009), who Macfarlane cites in his review of *Edgelands* – ironically, since Macfarlane himself is accused of a similar myopia by Kathleen Jamie (on which more later). Resident in East London at the time of writing his collection of essays, Wright observes and is scathing about the contemporary 'interest in debris and human fallout' (2009, p. 40) that might lead the new owner of a Georgian terraced house, for example, to observe: '“Gosh darling, there are people lying in the gutter on cabbage leaves, actually dying, just like they did in 18<sup>th</sup> century London”' (op. cit., pp. 128-9). Wright's enjoyment of his satirical flourishes might lead him to overstate the case somewhat, just as my own defensiveness about the areas of East London and Essex where I have lived and worked might lead me to bridle overly at Sinclair's account, but the point remains. Where is the acknowledgement of the difficulties afflicting people living in these particular landscapes at their particular time? Where, actually, is the acknowledgement of these individuals' autonomy and agency? If we substitute the word 'individuals' with terms such as 'animals' or 'the natural world', we can see that this is a key question for all writing about environment.

These are questions it is essential for a text such as *Edgelands* to consider, questions connected to the implicit critique of the here-and-now offered by pastoral. Yet that critique is absent, just as those sought acknowledgements are absent. That this is a failure not ameliorated by its pastoral affinities can be seen most clearly in *Edgelands'* utopias. Pastoral is nostalgically utopian in that it harks back to a better, now vanished way of life – hence its implicit critique of its contemporary society, in the contrast between the idyll and the here-and-now. *Edgelands*, as I've discussed, presents a nostalgic idyll – but it also presents idyll in an imagined future, one whose utopian features are predicated upon the dystopian failure of late capitalist society. For example:

A future fast approaches in which – after the second world recession of 2020 puts some of Britain’s best-known high-street brands (the ones that survived in 2009) out of business – Britain’s homemakers send their kids after school to gather the ingredients for their tea from the shared gardens in the old ruined factory, the railway sidings, the grass verges of the East Lancs Road. Then on the way home, they grab a handful of herbs from the beds outside the picturesque ruin that once was Tesco Metro, and dash back for a locally produced feast.’ (op. cit., p. 114)

A ‘picturesque ruin’, ‘shared gardens’, a ‘locally produced feast’; this is a land of plenty, of community and of adaptation. And if economic ruin approaches, then at least it is aesthetically beautiful. All these elements can also be found in ‘ruin porn’ – indeed, the cited description could have been excerpted from any number of articles and essays about Detroit. As discussed, one of the several criticisms of this movement is that it fails to engage with the real lives of those who inhabit the city, and questions of truthful or adequate representation of inhabitants’ lives have historically been brought into play in considerations of pastoral – often to challenge its literary validity.<sup>34</sup> So those residents of *Edgelands*’ imagined futures can be read alongside such other imaginings of Detroit or Arcadia – and alongside criticisms of them. In both the ‘new nature writing’ and the texts and images of ‘ruin porn’, particularly contemporary anxieties about authenticity – as well as awareness (or not) of the rights of disadvantaged groups of people to speak for themselves and their situations – collide with the issues pertaining to pastoral. Just as critics of these contemporary texts may scorn them because they don’t present the ‘truly wild’, because their chosen terrain isn’t ‘real’, or because they elide the voices of its inhabitants, they can also scorn them because they present ‘stock’ or clichéd characters when they do attempt to do so. Just as the pastoral text can be criticized both for not being literature and not being accurate because of its stylizations, so can its contemporary relatives.

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<sup>34</sup> See Alpers (1996), particularly Chapter One’s survey of the development of pastoral and of its criticism (pp. 8-43) and Chapter Four’s discussion of ‘Representative Shepherds’ (pp. 137-184).

Fruitful, then, to consider *Edgelands'* hermits. As a key figure in the fantasies of wilderness that permeated the picturesque, and a relative of the wise, old countryman who often inhabits pastoral, the hermit uncovers the degree to which a text subscribes to or acknowledges its own literariness, as well as its attachment to discourses of authenticity. In Farley and Symmons Roberts' text, as with the families who garden, these hermits are resilient, adapting to the economy of late capitalism. In fact, more than that; they appear to seize the opportunities offered by that economy to the small business with both hands. They are 'supported by start-up grants and seedcorn funding, setting up in business, entrepreneurial herbalists' (2012, p. 143). In keeping with the way that pastoral functions, Farley and Symmons Roberts cast the frame of 'now' and 'here' (this society, its conurbations and its concerns) around 'then' and 'there', but the satirical possibilities of that manoeuvre are not exploited. This utopia does not offer the alternative societal structures for which a reader might look in a pastoral, contingent as they might be.

There is much that is beguiling in the description of the hermits, and much else that is pastoral – not least in the nostalgic explicit referencing of other texts. Admittedly, these texts are 'the *Materia Medica*, the great herbals of the Germans Fuchs and Gresner (sic), the *Discorsi* of Matthioli, and the English herbalist John Gerard' (ibid), rather than Spenser's *Shepheard's Calendar* or Sidney's *Arcadia*. It is faintly possible that the use of herbal remedies might find an equivalence in the pastoral tendency to find remedy for or redress to the rigours of the court and the town in a rural or natural setting, but again, that possibility isn't taken up. Even the language of Farley and Symmons Roberts' descriptions takes on an antique tinge which seems to nod towards an imagined past where one is more closely acquainted with a *locus amoenus*. Thus, these 'urban wasteland hermits' 'make a living foraging for simples' (ibid).<sup>35</sup>

The synthesis of archaic and contemporary elements to produce this dystopia-utopia bleeds into language use in these passages, but only enough to lend an atmosphere, rather than to unsettle the text from its resolutely twenty-first century urban discourse. So, a

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<sup>35</sup> A 'simple', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is

A medicine or medicament composed or concocted of only one constituent, *esp.* of one herb or plant (*obs.*); hence, a plant or herb employed for medical purposes.

Now *arch.* In common use from c1580 to 1750, chiefly in *pl.* (2014)



hermit who gathers toad flax ‘prepares an infusion to be used as a purgative liver-cleansing agent, or boils the plants up in lard to make a green ointment that is excellent for piles and skin eruptions.’ (op. cit., pp. 142-143). With its ‘eruptions’ (rather than, say, acne or boils) and ‘purgative’ ‘infusion’, the lexis of this description hovers somewhere between sixteenth century herbal and twenty-first century wholefood and health shop. Marrying such diction to the resolutely contemporary and specific locations in which these activities take place (‘behind an advertising hoarding on the A419’, ‘brownfield sites in and around Swindon’, *ibid*) creates an enjoyable frisson, which Farley and Symmons Roberts deploy repeatedly in the book. But it’s a frisson, an aesthetic effect; as utopias go, it unseats little.

Elsewhere – in Wolverhampton to be precise – another hermit ‘hunts for wormwood and mugwort’ and ‘skullcap, found on walls next to the canal itself, brewed into a mild sedative decoction’ (the nouns again, lend an archaic atmosphere<sup>36</sup>) ‘hidden from view by the vast stands of buddleia’ (op. cit., pp. 144-5). The third hermit is found ‘on a swathe of post-industrial wasteland near the Lawley Middleway, just to the east of Birmingham city centre’. Here he (all hermits are male in this utopia) makes his ‘golden-rod tea’, heating it on ‘a pallet fire’. It is, the authors assure us, ‘good for sore throats, coughs, colds and flu’ (op. cit., p. 143). By this point we might start to wonder what has happened to the NHS. It clearly doesn’t have a place in *Edgelands*’ imagined future, but then neither does any political alternative to the one that currently holds sway in Britain at the time of writing, it would seem. And hermits may be solitary and hidden from view, they may live on the margins of whatever urban society has arisen in this future, but – in what must be one of the most unlikely variants of hermit concerns – these hermits are business men.

The entrepreneurial spirit is alive in *Edgelands*’ beekeepers as well. Like the hermits, they ‘have been quick to spot an opportunity’ and in this projected future, apparently follow the hermits around ‘in the same way as the Kenyanese Boran people would use the greater honeyguide bird (which has one of the most magical binomials: *Indicator indicator*)’ (op. cit., p. 146). That comparison naturalizes the beekeepers’ behaviour in a way that is problematic. The reader is not prompted to consider why people might need to make use of marginal land nor why such marginal figures as hermits have become so central to a

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Mugwort’, for example, first appears in texts of the sixth century, whilst a century earlier sees the first usage of wormwood, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2014).

nation's healthcare, nor are we encouraged to consider Kenyanese Boran people as anyone other than decorative examples of resourceful behaviour and – more crucially – the writers' global erudition. Here, as suggested previously, this land's and its inhabitants' aesthetic attractiveness is the only aspect that has any meaning. In this, it misses the opportunities offered by pastoral's self-contrast with the here and now to satirize or critique contemporary societal or other relations. The future may be more difficult and perilous for humans than the present, but at least it will be beautiful.

And beauty is much in evidence: the *locus amoenus* of the 'good wasteland' and 'rich corridors', the beekeepers' admiration of their insect labourers:

The hives are situated within easy foraging range of good wasteland, in an unexposed, warm, airy setting; the bees waste no time in finding the huge rakes of buddleia on city-centre spoil heaps, the carpets of black medick on capped landfill, the rich corridors of railway embankments. The beekeepers look on admiringly as the workers waggle-dance their figure-of-eight routines, information-sharing and task-allocating in a language of space and movement[.] (op. cit., p. 146)

This excerpt signals its strong affinities with the 'nature'-writing tradition, with writings of the naturalist, the ornithologist, the namers and describers of flora and fauna. It's evident in the naming of plants, precise description of location and of the bees' behaviour. This reader can't help wishing the work of the binmen and employees of the shipping container yard had been described so lovingly; to drop into the discourses of entomology and anthropology here appears as selective sidestepping in a passage which purports to people its pastoral. Such are the effects of the dominance of the aestheticizing principle.

Even accepting the discourse of 'nature'-writing here, there are problems. For example, the health benefits of any 'simples' or honey harvested from the edgelands are doubtful, unless we accept that in this imagined future humans and bees have developed a tolerance of the heavy metals, hormone-disrupting substances and pesticides that permeate ground once occupied by landfill and brownfield. It took people working on the 2012 Olympic Site (former location of the small and larger industries that lined the River Lea and

made use of the rail yards and loading platforms network around Stratford) approximately three years of work to clear the land of toxic substances.<sup>37</sup>

However we adjust the lens,<sup>38</sup> whether we read *Edgelands* as pastoral or ‘nature’ writing, objections to its simultaneous aestheticization of environment and claims for authenticity remain. Alpers has shown how pastoral is accused of being overly bound by literary and societal convention and how, connected to that, it is not truly representative of the lives of rural workers. In its unconvincing simulacra of rural life, it is too literary, but in adhering so strongly to literary convention, it isn’t literary enough, where literature is perceived as getting close to the ‘real’ or ‘true’. However, Alpers’ study points towards an overt, ironical awareness in pastoral of the difference between idyll and real world, between the lives represented and the literary form. I can see a way in which a twenty-first century pastoral might therefore present pastoral’s *otium* as possibility or promise, as fleeting rather than real or permanent; a suspended moment of idyll that interrupts the daily and the everyday and inserts into it notions of another time, another place. Indeed, this is what Alpers presents in an introductory chapter of *What is Pastoral*, choosing an unlikely text (Primo Levi’s *If This Is A Man*) to illustrate such a characteristically pastoral feature.<sup>39</sup>

*Edgelands* is utterly pastoral in that it presents moment after moment of these very twenty-first century idylls. However, despite the border geography of the edgelands, not enough is made of the pastoral sense of the idyll’s contingency and boundedness. It stops short of pursuing the consequences of its twenty-first century modulation of pastoral convention, preferring instead to continue, along with its reviewer, to race along the well-worn path of ‘true wilderness’, vying for the laurels of truest, most ‘natural’ and so on. In its resolute focus on the landscape, and on the aesthetics only of that landscape, it does far less than pastoral in that it completely removes both potential for satire and for utopian alternative. Moreover, the reader’s ability to accept *Edgelands* only on the terms of its

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Costing £9.3 billion across 2.5 km<sup>2</sup>, the enabling works were a three-year programme involving demolition of 190 buildings, construction of 30 new bridges and soil washing over 600 000 t soil.’ (Forestry Commission, 2010)

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the Claude glass and mirror as a metaphor, see Bertelsen (2004).

<sup>39</sup> See Alpers (1996, pp. 4-7).

aesthetics is undercut by the book's own claims to authenticity and its subsequent blind spots and omissions in the service of aesthetic beauty.

This can be seen most clearly in the people of the edgelands. Farley and Symmons Roberts' hermits and beekeepers – or even the schoolchildren scampering home to their tea – are familiar characters from the pastoral; rural inhabitants and workers who supply the returning herdsmen-narrators (or visiting courtiers/town-dwellers) with the necessary anecdotes and encounters, which highlight what is pleasurable or interesting in the *locus amoenus*. But *Edgelands'* simultaneous and contradictory insistence on the 'real' and impulse to apply an Instagrammatic filter over the edgelands ensure that the reality of those lives are not depicted. *Edgelands'* Claude glass prose is suggestive of suppression and concealment. In its transpositions of 'here and now' into 'then and there', it misses the opportunity for irony or critique in favour of an aesthetic that might be reflexive but leads nowhere new.

*Feral Ecologies? Kathleen Jamie and Timothy Morton*

It's ironic that, having pinpointed the way in which Farley and Symmons Roberts subscribe to the very 'prejudices' they censure, Robert Macfarlane himself is unable to step outside those discourses of 'real' and 'imitation' that surround discussions of wildness and 'nature'. This study is not the first to observe Macfarlane's investments. In a review of his book, *The Wild Places* (2007) Kathleen Jamie is as sharp in her criticism as Macfarlane is of *Edgelands*. Her review is significant beyond that, however, in the argument it sets out for a more nuanced and reflexive attitude towards the natural and the wild – qualities that are amply displayed in her own prose and poetic writing. Here is Jamie, appreciating the good intentions and beauty of Macfarlane's writing (just as Macfarlane, as a reviewer, appreciates that of Farley and Symmons Roberts) but nevertheless introducing a serious criticism:

when a bright, healthy and highly educated young man jumps on the sleeper train and heads this way, with the declared intention of seeking "wild places", my first reaction is to groan. (2008)

The pill is sweetened by Jamie's claim that this is her own 'huge and unpleasant prejudice' (ibid), but the point continues to be made. For Jamie, Macfarlane's writing is an

example of a tradition in ‘nature’ writing that she labels the ‘lone, enraptured male’; ‘Here to boldly go, “discovering”, then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words’ (ibid). In doing so, he is participating in ‘the association of literature, remoteness, wildness and spiritually uplifted men’, which she traces back to the establishment of Christian monasteries on such places as Iona or Lindisfarne (ibid). As resident of a country which suffers a history of being deemed ‘wild’ as in ‘unpopulated’, where the laws and economic interests of the far south have governed both its cities and its rural areas, this is perhaps a particularly pointed issue for Jamie, especially at a time when the prospect of Scottish national self-determination has appeared so close. No wonder her ‘hackles rise’. Duly, she notes how the voices of the people who inhabit and work this so-called wilderness are ignored, because they don’t fit the myth:

There are no other voices, no Welsh or Irish or differently accented English. It has to be thus, of course, because if we start blethering to the locals the conceit of empty ‘wild’ will be lost. So there has to be silence, an avoidance of voices other than the author’s. (ibid)

One of the results of this, Jamie argues, is a narrowing and homogenization: ‘What’s being reduced is [...] the variety of our engagement, our way of seeing, our languages’ (ibid). Instead,

there will be an awful lot of “I”. If there is a lot of “I” (and there is, in *The Wild Places*) then it won’t be the wild places we behold, but the author. We see him swimming, climbing, looking, feeling, hearing, responding, being sensitive[.] (ibid)

This is paradoxically a similar effect to that of *Edgelands*, for although the authors intended the landscape to ‘speak for itself’ in their dual, anonymous authorship (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012, p. 9), their scant presentation of the land’s inhabitants as generic characters elides those other voices. Just as here, where it’s ‘as if the land has been taken from us and offered back, in a different language and tone and attitude’, in *Edgelands* we also cannot avoid the sensation of being ‘in the company, however engaging, of another “owner”, or if not an owner, certainly a single mediator’ (Jamie, 2008).

Against omitting the apparently wild land's inhabitants and other visitors, against that excluding 'special wide-eyed sense of "empty 'wild' " ', then, Jamie argues for something far more expansive:

Waiting to be discovered is a wildness which is smaller, darker, more complex and interesting, not a place to stride over but a force requiring constant negotiation. A lifelong negotiation at that: to give birth is to be in a wild place, so is to struggle with pneumonia. If you can look down a gryke, you can look down a microscope. (ibid)

Here, Jamie is proposing a wildness that is synonymous with the processes of living and dying. I might substitute 'life' or 'biology' for 'wild' and come close to her modification of the term. She is also, by corollary, suggesting that writing about 'nature' can also be writing about the human; the human as a subject as well as the human's impact upon the 'more-than-human'. Accordingly, she positions her own creative work as an act of deliberate relating and of thinking about that act.

This reflexivity is readily demonstrated in her own prose writings.<sup>40</sup> The most striking example is her essay 'Pathologies', in which her account of a series of visits to a pathology lab is accompanied by reflections on both the act of looking and on ways in which she might negotiate concepts of 'nature'. What is interesting, from the perspective of this study, is the way in which she presents her experience of looking through the microscope at human cells. She observes 'a pink countryside, a landscape.' Moreover, it is one familiar to her; 'our local river, as seen by a hawk' (2012a, p. 30). Later, another microscope slide provokes her to compare *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria with 'musk oxen on tundra' (op. cit., p. 34), and the pathologist whom she's accompanying to exclaim "Isn't that a pastoral scene? They're grazing!" (ibid) The internal is rendered as external on the pathologist's cutting board, but it is also made so by Jamie's perceptions through the microscope lens. In her attempts to describe what she sees, the external is brought into the internal in her act of looking, and an artful blurring of boundaries between inner and outer occurs. This blurring is disorienting, both physically (the pathologist asks her to warn him " [...] if you feel seasick." ), (op. cit., p. 30) and conceptually. Jamie and her pilot swoop

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<sup>40</sup> See Jamie (2005, 2012a).

towards and over the contours of the tumorous liver, the stomach's acid glands, and are simultaneously inside and outside those organs. Although what is described involves chiefly the visual sense, the whole body-self seems to be involved: 'As though on a magic carpet, we flew' (ibid), 'we were swinging north, crossing the river [...] we stopped and hovered' (op. cit., p. 31). Here, in chiasmic fashion, the tactile and the visual cross and run into each other, just as 'inside' and 'outside' have.

It's in keeping with her view of wildness as 'a force requiring constant negotiation' (Jamie, 2008) that Jamie includes such an essay, set in a hospital and featuring the technologies of medical science, in such a book as *Sightlines*, with its reflections on the human relationship with 'nature'. It's even more interesting that, in order to discuss that 'smaller, darker' wildness inside the human body, she deploys comparisons with that more familiar expression of 'nature'; the landscape, both traditional 'wilderness' (the tundra) and less so (the urban section of the river Tay). But these constructs find appropriate expression here, as negotiations of culture around and with the concept of 'nature' are also what concern the author. In the same essay, she writes of the perplexity she feels after attending a conference on the environment; the questions it provokes 'about "nature" [...] which we were exhorted to reconnect with. What was it, exactly, and where did it reside?' (op. cit., p. 23).

This willingness to acknowledge and investigate complexity is a feature of Jamie's writings, permeated as they are by a sensitivity to the implications of the act of 'looking' and to the cultural construction of 'nature', not to mention the impact of the human upon the 'natural' world. Her most recent poetry collection, *The Overhaul* (Jamie, 2012b), contains, for example, a poem where a sighting of Jupiter's satellites through a telescope is juxtaposed with a contemplation of children asleep in another room of the house ('The Galilean Moons', op. cit., pp. 34-35). The far reaches of the solar system are firmly anchored by a specific, domestic setting – more than that, they are in relation, indivisible. In 'The Stags', one of many more conventionally 'nature' poems, a moment of 'civil regard' is presented between observer and animals (op. cit., p. 16). That moment – that phrase – is emblematic of her writing's commitment to taking account of not only the impact of the human upon 'nature' but the way in which human encounter with it is constructed.

In this commitment, Jamie is strongly aligned with the critical position outlined by Timothy Morton in his series of ecocritical writings, the most significant to this study being

*Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2009). Morton challenges concepts of Nature (the upper-case first letter is significant) through a series of writings that often overlap each other, revisiting and refining his arguments. He is a frustrating writer who clearly enjoys the provocative qualities of hyperbole and the grand, sweeping statement but whose stance is invigorating. Like Jamie, with her whale bones, viruses, childbirth and pathology labs, he critiques concepts of ‘nature as fantasy’ (op. cit., p. 14), pointing to what nature writing often edits out of the picture. For example, using Adorno’s critique of ‘nature’ poetry (1997, cited in Morton, 2009, p. 124), Morton writes:

The ambient sound of jet engines “destroys the actuality of nature as ... an object of poetic celebration.” Nature writing often excludes this negative ambience. When it does include it, it distinguishes it from the positive ambient of rustling trees or quiet ripples on a lake. (op. cit., p. 124)

Here again, as observed in Chapter Two, are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sounds, although here those values are not in use to delineate the difference between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ but in service to a different cultural construction: that of ‘nature’, depending heavily upon omission for its aesthetic effect. According to Morton, the problem attending this distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ambience is not just that it’s impossible to completely exclude one from the other, but that it prevents the writer and reader from being able to face squarely – let alone ameliorate the effects of – the ‘slow motion disaster’ Earth’s ecology is experiencing (2010b, p. 7). ‘A blue whale is easier on the eye than a slime mold’ (op. cit., p. 118) but neither should be privileged in Morton’s view, as to do so is to subscribe to an aesthetics which is irresponsible and ineffective in its attempt to relate to and represent ‘nature’. Given that all life, including human life, is imperilled by the continuing human impact upon global ecology, this requirement to produce an aesthetics equal to the Anthropocene era is an imperative of survival.



The eliding effect of such aesthetic choices (to write about whales and wilderness but not mould or motorways) also leads to writing that fails to recognise and fulfil the potential of its own artifice:<sup>41</sup>

Nature writing tries to be ‘immediate’ – to do without the processes of language and the artful construction of illusions. It wants to maintain the impression of directness. But this can only be a supreme illusion, ironically, in a world in which one can find Coke cans in Antarctica.’ (Morton, 2009, p. 125)

This is the problem – one of the problems – that beset *Edgelands*. In their intentions to avoid the ‘stick-waving’ of ‘professional outsiderism’ (Farley and Symmons Roberts 2012, p. 9) and the ‘awful lot of “I” ’ (Jamie, 2008) that befalls the writings of the intrepid, solo explorer, Farley and Symmons Roberts over-emphasized immediacy. However interesting the experiment of writing ‘within the anonymous tradition’, however sincerely meant the intention to ‘[s]ubsum[e] both of our voices’ and ‘let the terrain speak for itself’, the authors overlook the impossibility of achieving both these aims (2012, p. 9). If not ‘framing ourselves within it as intrepid explorers’, they might have done well to frame themselves more overtly, or at least acknowledge that the edgelands and their inhabitants are not actually writing the book – or that this is not, for example, a text in the verbatim genre. As discussed previously, this myopia gives the unfortunate effect of wiping out the reflexivity that might enable not only more nuanced constructions of ‘nature’ but also a more clear-eyed presentation of alternative ways for human beings to exist in relation to it and to each other.

Considering the pitfalls of pursuing ‘immediacy’ in one’s writing has strong implications for a text’s techniques. As noted earlier, Morton illuminates this in his discussion of a key passage in David Abram’s 1997 work, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Abram’s writing is intensely mimetic – or as Morton would have it, ecomimetic – seeking to place the reader within the landscape surrounding him during the writing of the book, evoking a natural environment with strong, sensory images, thus:

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<sup>41</sup> I return to ‘artifice’ and to Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s discussion of it in relation to poetry in Chapter Four. See Forrest-Thomson (1978).

the salty air that pours in through the loose windows, spiced with cedar and seaweed, and sometimes a hint of diesel [...] Sometimes, as well, there is the very faint, fishy scent of otter scat. (Abram, 1997, p. 266)

Morton calls this ‘pull[ing] out all the stops’ (2009, p. 128). His objection is not that it is aesthetically beautiful writing, but that it is lazy, in that it substitutes aesthetics for argument, creating ‘a fantasy-environment that sits beside the steps of the writer’s argument, not so much illustrating them as providing a compelling yet inevitably inconsistent sequence of images’ (op. cit., p. 129). Thus, the reader is invited to pause and remark what beautiful writing, what a beautiful environment has been rendered and is pulled away from the more flinty thoughts it accompanies. (In Abram’s book, the argument is that humans are alienated from their own senses and thus from their environment – in the case of urban life, perhaps necessarily so – and that this alienation, in addition to the fact that most contemporary humans live in cities, contributes to the lack of action to halt the pollution and destruction of natural habitats).

Morton describes Abram’s writing in the cited passage as a ‘weird combination of vividness and distancing, naturalness and artifice, remembering and recording, attuning and hallucinating’ (op. cit., p. 128). These might seem positive qualities, productive of an interestingly difficult-to-pin-down text, were it not for the fact that they actively work against the text’s own value of immediacy. As Morton elaborates:

“As I write” or “As you read” puts us in front of a text, a location for which it is tempting to imagine a domestic rather than outdoor setting, for historically precise reasons having to do with the development of reading as a private, silent act. We are in a state of privacy, yet able to access the outside world – we see it reflected in the text, or out of a window, or in a mirror. Despite the simulation of immediacy, ecomimesis, especially in phenomenological prose (both “artistic” and “philosophical”), establishes an *interior* space as much as an exterior one, a space furthermore furnished with reading materials, windows, or mirrors.’ (2009, pp. 126-7)

This, too, could be a fruitful and interesting effect if the text also acknowledged the contradictions of its actions – for example, it could lead to considerations such as those in which this thesis is interested; the indeterminacy and fluidity of interiority. But as Morton argues, Abram’s attempt to ‘impart a heavy dose of a certain subject position to the reader’ (op. cit., p. 130) lacks such reflexivity, and such texts’ imperative towards immediacy do not even recognize their basis on a problematic conceptual construction, familiar to this study: ‘By setting up nature as an object “over there” – a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact – it re-establishes the very separation it seeks to abolish’ (op. cit., p. 125). This is the question of accessibility familiar from Chapter One’s encounter with the work of Alice Oswald; it is the subject/object dialectic that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology exposes and moves beyond – and it is also part of the reason that Kathleen Jamie objects so strongly to the figure of the ‘lone, enraptured male’ and to that exhortation at the one-day conference she attends ‘to reconnect with’ ‘nature’ (Jamie, 2012a, p. 23). Unsurprising, then, that one of Morton’s answers to the problem is also a technique found in Jamie’s work and in that of Michael Haslam’s, with his ‘humanity de-centred’ (2010, p. 17): ‘Instead of looking at the trees, look at the person looking at the trees’ (Morton, 2009, p. 125).

There are many more such instances of and variations upon Morton’s central critique of prevalent aestheticizations of ‘nature’, all deliciously quotable, but more intriguing are his suggestions for writing techniques based on the wider construct of ‘nature’ and more clear-eyed human reflexivity – both philosophically and artistically – that he advocates. Interestingly, he looks to Romanticism for a way of leaving ‘The self-defeating routine of puncturing the aesthetic veil, only to have it grow back even stronger’ and appears to recommend writing that joins environment with ‘the cosmic, the historical, the political’, that makes use of ‘the intrinsic playfulness and reversibility of language’ (op. cit., p. 142) and ‘of the inherent qualities of the perception dimension that [...] makes perception diverge from the aesthetic (too often its analogue)’ (op. cit., p. 143). I’d argue that we can see all three elements in the work of Michael Haslam, and the first, definitely, in that of Kathleen Jamie’s.

An aesthetics for the Anthropocene era would also, according to Morton, deploy techniques of juxtaposition. Rather than Abram’s ‘little bubble of fantasy’ whereby ‘everything is seen from the outside and exoticized, in the very gesture of embedding us in a deep, dark inside’ (op. cit., p. 145) the writer could ‘isolat[e] the fantasy object of

ecomimesis, leaving it high and dry' (ibid). This seems to involve making visible the constructedness of the text – its artifice – and the presence in the text of its author, destabilizing the reader's ability to adopt a single point-of-view.<sup>42</sup> These techniques recall the destabilizing appearances of the first and second person in a poetic text, discussed in Chapter One – or the way in which Michael Haslam's 'Old Hall Down in the Hollow; Spring Up Sunny Bank' (2010, pp. 31-38) weaves attention to its own artifice into its very fabric.

Morton's other advocacy is for 'kitsch', which he defines as 'unalloyed enjoyment of an object not normally considered aesthetic in a "high" sense' (2009, p. 151). Here, we can recall Farley and Symmons Roberts' aversion to those 'sunlit uplands of jigsaw puzzles and Ladybird books, the rolling hills of biscuit-tin lids, the meadowlands and glades in [...] framed, reproduced pastorals' (2012, p. 2), and observe that this aversion is an inevitable result of their attachment to the notion that wildness is somehow more 'true' than the domesticated or managed, that 'natural' environments are more 'real' than the built. Against such attachments and aversions, 'kitsch' does indeed start to seem quite radical.

Kitsch isn't just a feature of such stylized representations as the mass-produced print, however. Since '[n]ature writing is easy to dismiss as lowbrow, bad taste, unhip' (Morton, 2009, p. 154), this Mortonesque kitsch might be found in declarations in favour of 'solace in "Nature"' (Haslam, 2010, p. 18). It might, confusingly enough, be found in the unalloyed enjoyment of such writing as Abram's, or in the pleasure derived from gazing at mountains. But this contradiction is itself in the spirit of kitsch, for 'radical kitsch exploits dualisms' (Morton, 2009, p. 160), allowing the sentimental to stand alongside the critical, the disgusting and slimy alongside the beautiful. Morton outlines less clearly the techniques a radically kitsch text would display, but bearing in mind the principle of dualism, perhaps an example would be a poem including bins of nappies alongside the behaviour of birds of prey. If this is the case, then we might say that kitsch is inherent in our twenty-first century, human-impacted 'nature'. This study proposes that 'nature' is also feral and queer.

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<sup>42</sup> See his discussions of Leigh Hunt's 'A Now, Descriptive of a Hot Day' and Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage* (Morton, pp. 145-147), for example.

*Feral Lang-scapes?*

Morton's recommendations for Anthropocene aesthetics, his and Jamie's arguments for a suitably reflexive construction of 'nature'; both dovetail with the notion of interiority explored in Chapter Two. All involve a critical position which seems to require residence in a productive state of tension between conceptual categories, and a way of resisting and making use of those categories, slopping in and out of and between both. All share that quality of oscillation; a dialectic that might reconcile neither state but which nevertheless points towards alternative possibilities to that binary opposition. The more we consider such a critical position (and this thesis has applied it mostly to those categories of interior/exterior, though it has been obvious, too, in this chapter's discussion of 'nature'/culture), the more we might find ourselves reaching for a term that can readily apply itself to philosophical, environmental *and* literary concerns. That reaching returns us to the text with which this chapter began.

Although, as explored earlier, Farley and Symmons Roberts don't offer a way forward in terms of writing reflexively about environment, they do at least point towards – without quite arriving at – a more expanded sense of the relationship between natural and built environments, and between the domesticated and wild. Despite their frustrating insistence on 'true wilderness', their presentation of the edgelands could be a strong emblem of the intertwining of 'nature' and 'culture'. It is ironic that, because of the limits of their critique, they overlook the potential of a term they use several times:

Feral is the new wild. After all, what's so good about wild animals, wild flowers? All they do is what their instincts tell them, what their genes taught them. Feral means you have a history, a proper back-story. And the edgelands are the domain of the feral. Here, finding shelter in the old ruins and food in the overgrown wasteland outside, cats forget their pet names, swap the lap and sofa for the pile of discarded overalls, or the car seat with its sporty trim.

(Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012, p. 158)

This use of the term ‘feral’ reflects the fluctuations in its use. From its original application in referring to undomesticated animals or untilled land, its denotation has changed so that it refers to ‘animals or plants that have lapsed into a wild from a domesticated condition’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014). It is this use that dominates the recent publication by George Monbiot (2013a), for example, in his argument for ‘re-wilding’, where – paradoxically – that lapse from domestication would be carefully managed and would involve human beings themselves becoming wilder. These days, ‘feral’ can carry strong connotations of ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilized’, without the sense that effective domestication was ever involved: consider, for example, the frequent appearance of the term ‘feral kids’ in discussions about anti-social behaviour. These variations in its denotations and connotations are neatly appropriate for a term which itself refers to a state hovering on the thresholds of such categories as ‘nature’ and ‘culture’.

Farley and Symmons Roberts’ adoption of the term is limited in service to their mission to reveal ‘true wilderness’. The place-swapping observed earlier of beauty and ugliness, urban and rural is present in this excerpted passage’s attempt at reversing the connotations of ‘wild’ and ‘domesticated’. Yet that attempt produces other connotative effects I’m not sure the authors intended. If ‘Feral means you have a history, a proper back-story’ then by corollary, ‘wild’ means you don’t. According to the excerpt, then, to be feral is to be at least partially encultured, to have a relatable story, one that is ‘proper’, i.e. worthy of consideration and so it is the wild and untouched-by-human (however much of a fantasy that might be) which is ignorable. In attempting to counter the glorification of wild ‘nature’, the gaze of the ‘lone, enraptured male’ upon the mountain or the forest, Farley and Symmons Roberts have fallen into the discourses that rapture sought to challenge; the perceived significance of urban modernity, and the myopia that excluded all but a particular socio-economic group (historically, Western European, predominantly if not exclusively male) from those histories.

There’s also a tendency to overlook the negative or complicated aspects of the feral experience, as if the transition between wild and domesticated is an easy one. The transition between the states is elided, so that the complications of that process are overlooked. After all, to move from ‘pet’ to ‘feral cat’ is hardly as smooth or straightforward as the quoted extract suggests; however attractively the car seat is presented (that ‘sporty trim’), it is usually ‘preferred’ to a lap and a sofa by a cat that has either suffered

abuse or has been abandoned or neglected by its human companions. And, as any human companion can testify, there are plenty of interim and indeterminate variants of the category of 'pet'.

Farley and Symmons Roberts appear to be on less complicated ground when they shift the feral from its animal application:

Edgelands woodlands are feral because most of them used to be tame. Some began life as gardens for long-demolished houses in what used to be the countryside before the cities grew. Others were copses left standing when those around were felled to make way for a factory or mill. (2012, p. 168)

Like that cat on the pile of overalls, the trees are no longer 'tame'. The second and third sentences are the verbal equivalent of a time-lapse film, condensing centuries of socio-economic change and thereby erasing their details. The labour and technology involved in changing the land on which the trees grow, the people who leave or arrive; all are erased by this speed. The effect is to naturalize the creation of the urban environment, much in the same way that its decline is naturalized by the ruin pornographers of Detroit. The cities 'grow'. Of course, this effect is a consequence of the writers' rhetorical insistence on feral (here, abandoned areas of conurbations) as the 'new wild'. It is also worth noting that gardens and the countryside are presented critically here only because they are all pretty in appearance, a marker of false wildernesses, rather than because they conceal in that appearance the hardships and labour that maintain the fields, the hedgerows, the rose border. This latter point might have been made by Raymond Williams, but as observed earlier, this political dimension is not considered by Farley and Symmons Roberts: as with the picturesque, this is an aesthetic.

Despite these dissatisfactions, there is something extremely beguiling about those pockets of land which are changed, 'managed' and then change again as they lapse in and out of human use. It is that sense of fluidity and autonomy that we can ask the concept of ferality to hold. Taking advantage of the loosening of usage towards and away from the wild, we might think of feral as something that lapses in and out of 'tame' and wild, that veers between relating to and avoiding the human. In fact, everything customarily thought of as wild could now be conceived of as feral; since everything in the biosphere has now

been affected by human action (the hole in the ozone layer over the Arctic and global warming, to use two such worn but nonetheless real examples), then nowhere is a ‘true wilderness’ any more. This stretches the term’s definition, but as I have pointed out, no more than in contemporary use. In such a version of ‘nature’, as with Timothy Morton’s and Kathleen Jamie’s, there is no such thing as the ‘true wilderness’. There is no area where the wild is completely excluded, and no area where it exists alone; merely a constant negotiation between ‘nature’ and culture, whatever the physical location.

This notion of a state that refuses to acknowledge boundaries and which not only occupies the space between them, but slops between and over categories is particularly attractive and relevant to the search for an alternative mode of thought to the interior/exterior binary and the ways in which the contemporary poem might contain that. It also finds consonance with a concept that Timothy Morton takes up in a *PMLA* paper, published in the same year as *The Ecological Thought* (2010b) – itself presented as a ‘prequel’ to *Ecology Without Nature* (2009).<sup>43</sup>

‘Queer Ecology’ (2010a) appears as a kind of addendum to *The Ecological Thought*, in that it repeats some of the same anecdotes and arguments. It’s a curious paper. It isn’t breaking new ground; much work – as Morton acknowledges in the footnotes and bibliography – has already been done by thinkers about nature’s queerness, and queerness’s naturalness, and how theory might map queerness onto ecology, and vice versa. It projects into the future, stating in a flurry of modal verbs what a queer ecology must be, and into the past, calling for the ecological perspective to acknowledge that it is already a queer one. It is queer because of a quality of existence that Morton names the ‘mesh’, introduced in this paper:

a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment. (op. cit., pp. 275-276)

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<sup>43</sup> See p. 3 of Morton (2010b) for a statement to that effect.



Nature is queer, Morton argues, not just because of the challenge to normative heterosexism that animal behaviour presents,<sup>44</sup> but also (and this, with much recourse to Darwin and the narratives of evolution) because of the fundamental inter-relation of organisms. Hence the ‘mesh’, and hence his argument that ‘ideologies’ of ‘nature’ ‘are founded on inside-outside structures that resemble the boundaries [that] heterosexism police’ (2010a, p. 274).

Morton’s strategy of seizing upon current thinking and co-opting it into his eco-critical perspective ensures that, beyond ‘queer ecology’, there has been ‘dark’ ecology, and currently, ‘hyperobjects’ and ecocriticism argued from the perspective of object-oriented-ontology.<sup>45</sup> The beguilements of performativity and fluidity offered by queer theory are not further explored, and despite the fundamentality of queer ‘nature’, Morton has given it decidedly less prominence in later writings, revisiting it only briefly in a blogpost, prompted by a student’s enquiry (2012b). This is an opportunity missed, not least because the ‘mesh’ and queer ecology’s refusal of bounded states finds a parallel with Merleau-Ponty’s ‘flesh’ and the chiasmic experience of perception. It might also find a parallel with the relations between academic and creative discourses, between discursive and poetic thinking – indeed with any threshold or (to extend use of our newly acquired, freshly polished term) feral critical strategy. Not least of all, it chimes with the grubby, unbeautiful, beautiful, cheek-by-jowl co-existing of undomesticated, tame, built, grown, human and more-than-human which I encounter every day in the area where I have made my home and about which I write. If ‘nature’ is queer, then it is also feral, and the lack of elaboration upon the former concept by Morton is to be regretted.

We should, however, insist on the concept of ferality (as a critical strategy or otherwise) with more than a little care. The contemporary popularity of ‘feral’ is already evident, as is the loosening of its connotations. Apart from Monbiot’s recent book and TED Talk where going ‘feral’ seems to at least partly involve standing around with a deer

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<sup>44</sup> My favourite of the numerous examples challenging the myth of heterosexual ‘nature’ is used to good rhetorical effect in Mortimer-Sandilands: ‘The world is full of lesbian gulls.’ (2005, p. 11)

<sup>45</sup> Morton (2012a, 2013).

on one's shoulders,<sup>46</sup> it has also been applied to concepts of futures and event prediction. Thus, for example, 'feral futures' model ways in which human impact upon the earth has rendered global events unpredictable.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the paper in which 'feral futures' appear twins ferality with Zen (another concept, like queer or pastoral, that has passed into current and more general, cultural use) sounds an alarm. For 'feral nature' or 'feral thinking' – or indeed, the 'feral lang-scape' I propose poetry can be – to truly be of value, it needs to be more than simply a label.

One of the attractions of applying 'feral' to the aforementioned concepts is that it can seem to validate and 'fix' something indeterminate; something that hovers on the edges of those philosophical and critical categories. Thus, what can be thought of as merely interim states of transition between binary poles can also be presented as states in their own right, positions from which thought can occur. But to present such indeterminacy in order to simply 'fix' it surely runs counter to its very character. There is the danger that the term becomes a label, and disarms the indeterminate, simplifying its complexities and contradictions, discouraging one from pursuing its nuances – especially as the dynamic tension that exists in a dialectic isn't always experienced as positive.

Despite that danger, the feral remains a potent concept for this study. For these purposes, it points to an activity, more than a state of being; to an oscillating mode of thought which does not accept the boundary except as a position from which to think critically, and refuses to acknowledge conceptual binary oppositions. Poetry's mode of thought is definitely feral, containing as it does the 'feral lang-scape' I have modified from Michael Haslam's wordwood and 'languescape' (2010a, pp. 14-15).

In order to substantiate such claims for both poetry and ferality, Chapter Four considers Veronica Forrest-Thomson's concept of the 'third area', and connects her sense of 'poetry's duty [...] to bring to our notice the third area which has always existed and is always in the future' (1978, p. 135). And it is with an eye on that 'third area' that the chapter considers the work of James Schuyler, a poet associated with the New York School who perhaps surprises as a choice for a discussion of environment and ferality, but who not

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<sup>46</sup> See Monbiot (2013a, 2013b) to confirm or counter that characterization.

<sup>47</sup> See Ramírez and Jerome Ravetz (2011), particularly p. 479.

only writes a locale which accords with Jamie's and Morton's expanded 'nature' but presents an interiority that is ebulliently fluid, queer, feral.

## Chapter Four

### Towards the Feral

So far, this thesis has argued for an expanded view of ‘nature’; one that takes account not only of the irrevocability of human impact and the necessity of presenting that in any writing about environment, but also of the agency and alterity of the ‘more than human’. Its readings of locale-focused writings have opened the way for an examination of conceptualizations of interiority, advocating one where boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are permeable, nowhere more so than in language, and finding, in the work of Michael Haslam, such a presentation of lived experience.

This thesis has preferred an alternative line of thought to the conceptual binarizing found in such dualities as inside/outside, mind/body, wild/tame or indeed ‘nature’/culture – to name those encountered throughout my critical-creative enquiry. Drawn from the focus on writing environment and ‘nature’, the feral has appeared as a concept which can provide such an alternative. As explained in the previous chapter, this term can identify a critical mode of thought which makes use of the tension of the dialectic and offers an alternative to the entrenchment threatened by use of binary categories. This chapter goes on to expand that feral possibility, and argues that poetic thought is particularly aligned with ferality in its pointing to a ‘third area’ (Forrest-Thomson, 1978, p. 135) and its (connected) repurposing of everyday language for its own ends.

Bearing that awareness of everyday language in mind, we will go on to consider the work of a poet who initially would seem to be an anachronistic choice for ferality: James Schuyler. I will argue that, if we can find the feral and an expanded concept of ‘nature’ in the work of such an urbane, city-dwelling writer of the ‘urban pastoral’ (Gray, 2010), then not only is ferality truly useful, but the claims made for poetry’s alterity are strong. In the course of this latter claim, the chapter takes up Simon Jarvis’s presentation of poetry as a mode of thought, with recourse to Valéry’s concept of poetry as a language art and Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s theory of poetic artifice.

Firstly, then, we will consider why it is that poetry in particular has been conceived of as an art-form uniquely able to provide an alternative to binarized thinking. We have already encountered two attempts upon conventions of thought – in this case, thought about ‘nature’ – and some of the pitfalls. Farley and Symmons Roberts (2012), for

example, attempt in *Edgelands* to re-adjust their readers' sense of what 'beautiful' and 'wild' can mean, but as we have seen, in doing so merely transpose the old ways of looking at 'nature' onto a contemporary, urban environment in a way that leaves existing values intact. By contrast, Timothy Morton (2009) approaches the Anthropocene era's need for new ways of thinking and looking via critique, and this critique works in partnership with Morton's introduction of concepts such as the 'mesh' and 'queer nature' to advance substantially alternative aesthetic values in 'nature' writing and its related forms.

But is it genuinely possible to dissolve those binaries that so dominate conceptual thinking? In a way, that is the wrong question, and it's worth clarifying at this juncture that this study is based upon the assumption that these binaries are categories of thought, that they do not exist necessarily in the world – but that since such oppositions are part of the history of human thought, they shape the way we experience the world in ways both helpful and damaging. It is difficult to evade their clutches, but not impossible.

This is where the feral mode of thought introduced in this thesis can come into play, for ferality seeks neither to dissolve nor overcome either poles of the binary oppositions, but rather, leaving them in place, passes from one to the other constantly, occupying the space between – the liminal, the threshold, the boundary itself – in an active and constant demonstration of the redundancy of their entrenchment, thereby retaining the energy and dynamic tension that exists when critical thought cannot or will not resolve a question into a statement. As with the incursions upon the more-than-human by the human – and as with the incursions of 'nature' upon the built – this constant scribbling into and over will inevitably affect those poles, perhaps eroding them completely, perhaps forcing a mutation. In the end, whether they remain or not, those oppositions become less significant than the activity between them; such is the action of the feral, and in this, it has a ready parallel in poetic practice, to which claim we will turn presently.

Discussing the overcoming of oppositional conceptual poles reinforces them, makes them more central, however; the above description of ferality's actions emanates from within the clutches of binarism, in its acknowledgement of its categories. Thus, one of the things this chapter will do is try to re-imagine critical and other activity from the point of view of the feral. This point-of-view is already implied in the paragraph above, when it states that the activity of the feral between the oppositions becomes more of consequence than the oppositions themselves. For the key characteristic of ferality is that it does not

recognize either the borders it transgresses or its own naming. To return to one of the examples from Chapter Three: a feral cat is unaware it has crossed over into a ‘wild’ state, it is simply concerned with being warm or cool enough at rest and finding enough to eat. If these things can be found by entering an inhabited building, it will do so; if they cannot, it will find them elsewhere. The categories that we have considered in this thesis – and those which Veronica Forrest-Thomson is intent on dissolving, as we will see below – can be put aside; this is the possibility offered by the feral.

Holding that in mind, then, we shall turn to the parallels between feral and poetic practice. In order to substantiate that claim, it’s necessary to unpick what is distinctive about poetic practice – and here is where we have recourse to the work of Veronica Forrest-Thomson. For Forrest-Thomson, it is precisely those practices which distinguish poetry from prose that make the latter a revolutionary art. To justify the use of such an adjective, we should refer to this passage towards the end of *Poetic Artifice*, where, she argues:

The dissolving parody of artifice and the value it offers leads to the reflection that those who deny the validity of the old dichotomies – idealism/realism, idealism/nominalism, idealism/empiricism, capitalism/communism, form/content – are on the right track; that what is needed is another set of relations and concepts in which these old quarrels will be dissolved. Moreover it is poetry’s duty to show use of these relations and to bring to our notice the third area which has always existed and is always in the future[.] (1978, p. 135)

Here, Forrest-Thomson makes a case for poetry as an emancipatory form of critical thought that uncovers the dualities – ‘idealism/realism, idealism/nominalism, idealism/empiricism, capitalism/communism, form/content’ (ibid) – and the thinking that produces them. Not only that, poetry will be instrumental in the melting away of these ‘old’ ways within alternative structures; such is its ‘duty’. ‘Duty’ is an interesting word to use in this context, suggesting as it does art’s obligation to the social and political context from which it arises. As stated, this is an emancipatory obligation; art as a revolutionary agent will usher in a new set of concepts and a new set of political and social relations. Yet despite the infectious vigour of Forrest-Thomson’s assertions, it is not to this aspect of the

argument that we should give the most part of our attention; as earlier stated, to wish for ‘dissolution’ of those ‘old quarrels’ is still to acknowledge their dominance over our thought.

What distinguishes Forrest-Thomson’s from other attempts to vanquish philosophical duality is her assertion that it is poetry’s ‘artifice’ – that is, ‘all the rhythmic, phonetic, verbal, and logical devices which make poetry different from prose and which we may group together under the heading of poetic artifice’ (op. cit., p. ix) – which ensures it is uniquely placed to effect such transformative action, thus enabling us to envisage a new mode of thought: the ‘third area’. This ‘third area’ is analogous to the queer terrain that Morton envisaged for ‘nature’ and ecocriticism, to the porous texture of the boundary between inside and outside that Chapter Two investigated, and to the impulse to imagine alternative societal structures not quite realized by Farley and Symmons Roberts’ picturesque, edgelands utopia. It is also the terrain described by the spoor of the trespassing, mobile feral.

How is it that poetic practices can bring into focus the ‘third area’? The answer must lie in the way that poetic language lies alongside everyday language as its ‘parody’ and its alternative (op. cit., p. 135). This recalls Paul Valéry’s observations about poetry, which, in its operations as ‘an art of Language’ makes use of the very same words as ‘ordinary speech’ (1958, p. 63). Unlike the musician who has, Valéry claims, ‘a body of resources expressly made for his art’, the poet ‘has to borrow *language* – the voice of the public’ (op. cit., p. 67). Yet if poetry ‘borrows’ the everyday’s words, what it does with them is something quite other, as Valéry’s analogy makes clear immediately, where poetry is dancing, and prose is walking:

however different the dance may be from walking and utilitarian movements, it uses the same organs, the same bones, the same muscles, only differently co-ordinated and aroused.

(op. cit., p. 71)

In other words, we wouldn’t use dancing to get us to the bus stop, nor would we want to, since dance’s purposes are utterly different than such ‘utilitarian’ motives. Just so with poetry and the practices which comprise its ‘artifice’ when compared to prose. In

order to consider why they open up that ‘third area’, we need to consider those practices more precisely – and for that, we turn to Simon Jarvis. In doing so, we should first note his preference for the term ‘verse’ over ‘poetry’, which stems from the need to avoid a homogenizing essentialism that threatens to subsume all literary activity under the same heading – what he terms (in a response to Terada, 2008) ‘this indeterminable blancmange of (mythical) everydayness’ (2010a, p. 934).<sup>48</sup> Against such reductionist thought, Jarvis places Valéry’s dance – that is, verse:

verse is not a subset of language. It is an institution, a series of practices [...] Verse adepts cut up, mutilate, select from language – using intonation contours, rhythms, print, gesture, and so on. (2010a, p. 933)

Or to put it another way (as Jarvis does in a paper of the same year):

Language is one of the materials of verse. Others are paralinguistic or extralinguistic – rhythms which do not merely derive from language but which are imposed on it in a series of transformative mutilations. (Jarvis, 2010b, p. 292)

Specifically, these rhythms and ‘mutilations’ occur where ‘language [is] segmented, where the segmentations need not coincide with syntactical segmentations’ (Jarvis, 2012, pp. 72-3). Such verse practices are productive of an autonomous mode of thought:

thinking in verse is a practice and an institution different from thinking in prose, and the connection between the two is not simple or automatic even when they happen to come out of the same head. (2010a, p. 933)

Valéry’s dance, again. For ‘thinking through making’ (op. cit., p. 934) is more than working one’s way through a collection of writing strategies to produce extraordinary

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Let’s let “lyric” dissolve into literature and “literature” into culture, using a minimalist definition of “culture” from which no production or everyday experience can be excluded’ (Terada, 2008, p. 200)



effects using ordinary words. Those strategies or activities or verse practices induct one into a different way of thinking, and it is this mode of thought, this ‘dancing’ that we can align with Forrest-Thomson’s ‘third area’. That the reader might experience ‘bafflement’ (Jarvis, 2010b, p. 282) or disorientation in the readjustment from prose to poetry is not only inevitable, but to be welcomed, for it is that oscillating adjustment she must make in the face of her disorientation that accesses that area; she too, in reading the poem, is ‘thinking in verse’.

This can occur even (or perhaps particularly) in poetry using diction especially close to prose utterances or to everyday conversation. This is certainly the case with the last poet whose work I consider. James Schuyler isn’t contemporary, nor is he British, nor is he initially obvious as representative of ferality or poetry’s difference, as acknowledged at the beginning of this chapter. But we can hold fast to our aligning of Schuyler’s work with ferality and with alterity, not least because – as we will go on to consider – Schuyler’s ‘Hymn to Life’ (1993, pp. 214-223) demonstrates what we discovered in Chapter Two; that our inner thought and voice are socially constructed and conditioned by their porosity; that our interiority – which in Schuyler’s work, just as in Michael Haslam’s (2010), spills out and back again, taking its locale along with it, meeting it in language – was never really private from the beginning.

Moreover, James Schuyler’s work stands as an example of the way in which poetry may present human, more-than-human and environment in a way that doesn’t require mastery, that accounts for human experience without reducing its complexity and variety and that does so with a sense of individuality ‘de-centred’, to borrow Michael Haslam’s term (2010, p. 17). It is a poetry that presents human relations and experiences often in an urban setting, but nevertheless in continuity with the writings on environment and ‘nature’ so far considered. Perhaps it is this aspect as much as his membership of the ‘New York School’ of poets that draws the label of ‘urban pastoral’ to his work.<sup>49</sup> In fact, this application of the pastoral to Schuyler’s work raises another reason why he is such an apposite choice for this study. In Schuyler, the pastoral’s idyll and *otium* are the everyday; rather than an escape from usual life, his pastoral consists precisely of that usual life. It is tempting to suggest that – compared to the episodes of mental ill health from which

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<sup>49</sup> See Gray (2010).

Schuyler suffered throughout his life – the ordinary was not ‘special’ as in elevated into something precious, but valued for its very ordinariness, the way in which it did *not* present a heightened moment. And this sensibility continues to Schuyler’s use of language; frequently and recognizably the language of the ‘everyday’. Indeed, it is striking how very often that epithet is applied in accounts of his work. As Daniel Katz remarks, “To the extent that a critical tradition does exist, [...] it tends to single out [...] its “precision of detail” or “descriptive exactness” along with its immersion in and attentiveness to the “everyday” ’ (2011, p. v).<sup>50</sup> Katz takes issue with this emphasis, arguing that it risks missing the way in which ‘his work in many ways troubles and complicates the traditional contexts and groundings of this sort of “detailed observation” of which he is clearly a master’ (op. cit., p. vii). I agree with this observation, and would argue that Schuyler’s act of complication is based upon an interiority which escapes and refutes the subject/object binary underpinning those statements of praise for his clarity of description and elevation of the ordinary. In this, the interiority on display describes and occupies a feral terrain; a function of the distinctly chiasmic sensibility at work in the poetry. As we will see, although it might seem surprising to find ferality in the poetic thought of Schuyler’s ‘Hymn to Life’, I stand by it: it is a poetry that amply presents a ‘third area’, or as Ann Lauterbach or Schuyler himself might have it, a ‘fifth season’.<sup>51</sup>

Nowhere is this more evident than in the poem we are about to examine, which – as already suggested – demonstrates a similarly fluid and chiasmic interiority and expanded sense of ‘nature’ to that previously admired in the work of Michael Haslam. There is much

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<sup>50</sup> As Katz explains in a footnote, the phrases are gleaned respectively from: Moss (1981, p. 14); Lehman (1998, p. 245); Champion (2002, *passim*).

<sup>51</sup> The phrase is taken from Schuyler’s poem, ‘Thursday’ (1993, pp. 311-312). Ann Lauterbach uses it to describe his poetry thus: ‘from the fits and starts of ruptured time, a new weather in which nature and culture are inextricably bound in rhythms and visions of the most consummate artifice: a fifth season’ (1990, p. 75). I argue for a vision of time in ‘Hymn to Life’ that is cyclical rather than ‘ruptured’, but Lauterbach’s use of ‘artifice’ is helpful to this study and in keeping with a view of Schuyler’s work such as that held by Daniel Katz (2010, 2011), who suggests that much is missed if readers and critical writers emphasize overly Schuyler’s fidelity to objects and descriptive prowess.

that separates the work of these two poets. Schuyler's verse hardly shares Haslam's intense interest in the English verse tradition, partaking instead of very different registers and principles of construction, and his use of irony tends towards charm and self-deprecation rather than to reflexive word-play or direct social historical commentary. Schuyler's verse-making appears languid, with its often very long lines and/or use of conversational constructions, whereas Haslam's work bristles energetically – and each poet's work is differently peopled. Schuyler's poems are often oriented to an addressee, or include reported speech, or are full of exchanges between people, whereas Haslam's poems are dominated by solitariness, where encounters with people are presented as memories, or as interactions with the material and other traces they leave behind, or occur with people who might be imaginary or mythical.

Despite these differences, both Haslam's and Schuyler's poetries share a foundational de-centring of humanity, although it is accomplished in different ways, and an intertwining of interiority with environment. Connected to this latter aspect, both poets' work is chiasmic, as we will discover in the following discussion of Schuyler's 'Hymn to Life'. However, it isn't merely the philosophical connection between Schuyler and the conceptualizations this study has been advancing that merits a discussion of his work here. 'Hymn to Life' demonstrates ample evidence of the techniques nominated by Timothy Morton as being particularly suited to creating the possibility of a 'critical ecomimesis' (2009, p. 142); juxtaposition, often manifesting itself as a reflexive foregrounding of the verse's own artifice, and a kitsch sensibility – that is, a democratic valuing and presentation of both that which is deemed tasteful and that which is deemed tasteless, ugly and beautiful, private and public. Thus, Schuyler's expansive presentation of lived experience is strongly in accord with the construct of 'nature' advocated by this thesis, whilst the poetry's ironizing reflexivity, and juxtaposition of 'everyday' and other utterances provide fertile ground for considering 'artifice' and the way in which it produces poetry's 'third area'. To separate out the presentation of 'nature', reflexivity and the 'everyday' in Schuyler's work is not to suggest that one experiences such a separation in reading it, however. The poem's 'thinking through making' (Jarvis, 2010a, p. 934) is led by a chiasmic relation to the world; hence my connection of Schuyler with Haslam. Both poets achieve this relation, albeit by different means; whereas Haslam's verse thinking occurs in part via the chiasmic relation between sound and connotation (and thus wider meaning), Schuyler's verse making

operates more predominantly via the suggestions of perception upon thought and thus of meaning. A key part of this is the way in which Schuyler's work constantly comments on its own making, and it is to this that we turn first.

One aspect of such reflexivity is the echoing by 'Hymn to Life' of other texts. In particular, its modulation of certain of T.S. Eliot's poems is instructive and demonstrative of Schuyler's generous inclusivity. Just as *The Wasteland's* 'Burial of the Dead'; 'Hymn to Life' begins in and inhabits the month of April, but the resemblance is stronger than that.<sup>52</sup> So, instead of 'Lilacs out of the dead land' (Eliot, 1974, p. 63), Schuyler gives us 'snowdrops' 'Out of the death breeding / Soil' (Schuyler, 1993, p. 214). The recent passing of winter is still present, as is the stored promise of growth in bulbs and corms. But whereas in Eliot, 'Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers' (Eliot, 1974, p. 63), 'Hymn to Life' offers snowdrops and croci which grow from 'corms' 'which come by mail' and flower later in the poem; far from 'dried' and with more than 'A little life' (Schuyler, 1993, p. 214).

Later, another Eliot echo occurs. Consider this section of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock': 'In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo' (1974, p. 13). Eliot follows a line of five trochees (the end syllable is elided) with a shorter line consisting of a trochee and three iambs. The lines trip along, dominated by the iamb's skipping rhythm, towards the full rhyme which – in combination with the tetrameter line and its associations with common metre and popular forms such as the ballad and nursery rhyme – creates a bathetic effect. This bathos is by its very nature comical in tone, but here one can read that comedy as somewhat hostile; the contrast between the casualness of 'come and go' and the aesthetic and cultural connotations of 'Michelangelo' is satirically dismissive of those 'women'. How much more inclusive ('people' rather than 'women', for a start), and generous is Schuyler's echo – a generosity enmeshed in its rhythms and line lengths (the stressed syllables are in bold):

And **in** | the **sit** | ting **room** | **people** | **sit**  
 And **rest** | their **feet** | and **talk** | of **where** | they've **been**, | **motels** | and **Mon** | ticello  
 (1993, p. 217)

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<sup>52</sup> See lines 1–7 of 'The Burial of the Dead', in Eliot (1974, p. 63).

The difference between this expansiveness and Eliot's tight control is pronounced. In the latter's lines, the iambic rhythm is established and then contradicted by a trochee, and the step-change between iamb and trochee at 'people' introduces a minute pause before that word, lending it a stronger emphasis. This emphasis doesn't just modify Eliot's Prufrock, it rebukes him for his reduction of half the population to a category, his weariness at social interaction. The comic bathos of the repeated 'sit', the homeliness of 'rest their feet', the contrast between the generic unremarkableness of 'motels' against 'Monticello' (home of Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States of America) and the fact that both are legitimate topics of conversation about 'where they've been'; all these features mark out 'Hymn to Life' as a poem of compassionate, undeluded generosity towards human beings. This compassion is all the more strongly delineated against those echoes of Eliot's poem, which, with its tight, anxious sense of alienation, is transmuted here into a celebratory representation of human life and its banalities, banalities like small talk, which serves as a kind of temporary bridge between social individuals. These banalities contain that quality of 'kitsch' advocated by Morton; in this passage of 'Hymn to Life' we find, if not so much the unalloyed enjoyment of the 'pretty' or beautiful (although I'd argue that enjoyment can be found everywhere throughout the poem's ten pages), then certainly the expression of sentiments which – especially taken out of context – might appear sentimental or banal.

Eliot isn't the only echo. Later, Shakespeare's Caliban ghosts through. 'This peace is full of sounds and / Movement' (op. cit., p. 304) recalls the lines given to Caliban in *The Tempest*; 'The isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs' (Shakespeare, 1951, 3.2:130-1) Here the reassurance offered by Caliban to his courtier companions about the everydayness of such unusual, unattributable sound is translated into the sounds of the inhabited, everyday world, producing the reassurance that it is still full of signs of life. It is significant, given the emphasis within the poem upon monuments and memorials to the dead, that 'Peace' here isn't silence, and that this isn't 'Resting In Peace' but peaceful restfulness; coexistence with the producers of those sounds, whether human or not. In an earlier passage, transport vehicles and birds are accorded the same attention:

[...] The world is filled with music, and in between the music, silence  
 And varying the silence, all sorts of sounds, natural and man made:  
 There goes a plane, some cars, geese that honk and, not here, but  
 Not so far away, a scream so rending that to hear it is to be  
 Never the same again [...]

(Schuyler, 1993, p. 214)

This is far from an indifference to world; the scream's owner is never found, but its effect is such that the hearer is forever different. Similarly, the 'all sorts of sounds' introduce interest and contrast as they 'var[y] the silence' – and both 'natural and man made' are just as welcome.

This presentation of sound is in keeping with the expanded sense of 'nature' advocated and demonstrated by Kathleen Jamie and Michael Haslam. 'Hymn to Life' celebrates the co-existence of both 'muck and scarlet emperors' (op. cit., p. 222) and deems human-made and naturally-occurring as equally worthy of attention and equally beautiful. Thus 'Trails of rust' are 'a lovely colour to set with periwinkle violet-blue' (op. cit., p. 216). This is more than merely the re-presentation of the built or of decay through the lens of an unchanged aesthetics, such as we might find in *Edgelands* (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012). As the following excerpt demonstrates, the human-made is integral to understanding and appreciating the natural:

[...] the moon burns through  
 Racing clouds, its aureole that of rings of oil on water in a harbor  
 Bubbling up from an exhaust

(Schuyler, 1993, p. 216)

This is truly the action of an artist affirming the statement with which Morton ends *Ecology Without Nature*: 'We choose this poisoned ground' (2009, p. 205). In this aesthetic, polluted harbour water is not just beautiful, but a means for the reader to understand the visual effects of the moon crossed by wind-blown clouds. Right down to its core, in its poetic technique, where similes habitually transform the natural into the human-made in order to enable the reader to see and to understand through its lens, 'Hymn to Life' accepts

that ‘poisoned ground’. Thus, ‘the weather is stuck / Like a record’ (1993, p. 219) and forsythia flowers are ‘warm as lit gas jets’ (ibid). Moreover, we can find in the poem that ‘concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries’ which characterizes Morton’s ‘mesh’ (2009, p. 275); a description which could also function as that of Forrest-Thomson’s ‘third area’ and dissolution of ‘old quarrels’. In this case, the categories which are confounded are those between grown and built objects and between taxonomies of flora and fauna, but we’d do well to hold the mesh’s ‘concatenation’ in mind with a view to the philosophical alterity of the feral.<sup>53</sup>

To return to those forsythia. They do not only become ‘gas jets’ but continue to transform:

Through it all the forsythia begins to bloom, brown  
 And yellow and warm as lit gas jets, clinging like bees to  
 The arching canes where starlings take cover from foraging cats.  
 (Schuyler, 1993, p. 219)

The transition is from flora to burning fuel, to insects and arguably to birds: the verb ‘clinging’ seems to transfer some of its sense associatively to the starlings, given its proximity to them on the page and the way in which it shares a connotation of urgency with the phrase ‘take cover’. This is the transgression ‘of boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment’ that Morton imagined (Morton, 2009, pp. 275-276). Similarly,

A cardinal  
 Passes like a flying tulip, alights and nails the green day  
 Down  
 (op. cit., p. 223)

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<sup>53</sup> Indeed, such a description has already been applied to Schuyler’s work: ‘Describing her affinity for Schuyler’s poetry, Freilicher told me she liked his “concatenation of natural images”’ (Gray, 2010, pp. 119-120).

A bird becomes a plant becomes an implement, and this mobility is not merely an effect of imagery, but a function of the verse-writing. Flight really does occur: that movement travels over one line break, through a line, and over another line break to land in a third line. And it truly is a landing, felt by the reader in the heavier emphasis on ‘Down’, created by its place at the start of a line.

Nothing is beyond Schuyler’s ‘civil regard’ here, to co-opt Kathleen Jamie’s phrase (2012, p. 16). Just as the stags and the observers are held in her poem in a moment of equilibrium, where human and more-than-human want or fear nothing of the other, so here, animal, human, lovers, sunshine, time; all are held by the long lines in equal tension, equal appreciation:

Day, suddenly sunny and warming up for more, I would like to stroke you  
 As one strokes a cat and feels the ridgy skull beneath the fur and tickles  
 It behind the ears. The cat twists its head and moves it toward your fingers  
 Like the lifting thighs of someone fucked, moving up to meet the stroke.  
 The sun strokes all now in this zone, reaching in through windows [...]

(Schuyler, 1993, p. 218)

Here, stroking begins as affection; a gesture towards a moment of lived experience. This is swiftly transferred via the simile to the reciprocal, tactile pleasure experienced by pet and human, which – for the human at least – is again, an expression of affection and this affection and pleasure in turn – again, via a simile – becomes a sexual act of (at least) pleasure, before finally settling into the effect of the sun’s rays. The clause ‘The sun strokes all now in this zone’ sweeps up cat, human, day, lovers into its ‘zone’, but this entanglement has already occurred, not only through the swift transitions via similes but also by the ‘concatenation’ of consonance which joins recipients and givers, weather and animals and human lovers in a passage full of tactile immediacy.

It is in such a passage that we can assert further that Schuyler’s ferality is located; a ferality that transgresses boundaries it does not recognize. With its associations of ‘wildness’ and ‘animality’, the feral is also appropriately applied to the aesthetics of the above excerpt, which flows in and out of what might be considered ‘tasteful’ or shareable of human behaviour in public, and values that moment of reciprocity between the animal



and human. This is most strongly apparent in that moment of discombobulation that occurs when the reader encounters the comparison of cat behaviour to that of a lover. It is at the least somewhat startling to move so directly from the 'ridgy skull' of the cat pushing against a hand to 'the lifting thighs of someone fucked, moving up to meet the stroke'. We sense that some boundary of social appropriateness has been crossed, a little like the cat which refuses to let two lovers dislodge it from its place on a bed.

Given such moments where 'feral' aesthetics blooms, and bearing in mind the way in which these demonstrate Schuyler's expanded, queer 'nature', it's no surprise to turn to the question of interiority and find that it, too, is intensely fluid; amply demonstrating Merleau-Ponty's observation that 'Thought is no "internal" thing and does not exist independently of the world or of words' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 183). As discussed, the fluidity that connects 'Hymn to Life' to Morton's 'mesh' proceeds from the fluidity of the interiority presented, founded as it is on a chiasmic relation to world – indeed, as such, existing as a function *of* world.<sup>54</sup>

One of the ways in which this fluidity appears is in the splicing together of everyday language, the utterances of others and the 'internal' utterances of thought in a continuous flow across and over the long lines that characterize this poem.<sup>55</sup> This technique of juxtaposition proceeds inevitably from the poem's chiasmic mesh which is its characteristic mode of thought. So, for example:

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<sup>54</sup> Timothy Gray also remarks upon this quality of Schuyler's work: 'his writing has always seemed more fluid than that of his peers' (2010, p. 101).

<sup>55</sup> In this reading of 'Hymn to Life', I find myself increasingly in agreement with David Herd's view that

in the process and experience of composing, Schuyler opened his writing up: to other voices, but also, as he was able confidently to put it in 'Slowly' (a poem which originated in *The Diary*) to 'the what of which you are a part'; where 'the what' was, as Schuyler called it, 'life' - as distinct from a Romantic 'nature', or, say, from a Heideggerian sense of 'being' - and with which he understood himself to be continuous. (2007, p. 168)

[...] Under the hedges now the weedy strips grow bright  
 With dandelions, just as good a flower as any other. Unfortunately,  
 You can't pick them: they wilt. But these burgeoning days are  
 Not like any others. Promise is a part of it, promise of warmth  
 And vegetative growth. "Wheel me out into the sun, Sonny,  
 These old bones that creak need it." And the gardener does not  
 Come back: over the winter he had a heart attack, has to take it  
 Easy.

(Schuyler, 1993, p. 220)

A visual image leads to a value judgement ('just as good a flower') leads to the conversational 'Unfortunately'. The following statement about 'these burgeoning days' connects in narrative sense to the previous statement, certainly, given that the growth of the season prompted the observation about dandelions, but appears as something of a leap, from the specifics of dandelions wilting to such a generalization. And what to make of the reported speech? The implication is that it is somehow attached to 'the gardener' who is taken ill and retires, prompting thoughts about mortality. But before we meet the gardener who adds a note of compassion to proceedings, there is a hint of parodic humour in the use of ' "Sonny" ' and ' "these old bones" ' which punctures the importance of the statement about 'promise'. This is very far from the 'objective observer' stance we encountered in *Edgelands* (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012) in Chapter Three; there is an implicit merging between the speaker and the gardener, a lack of separation which speaks to enlanguaged thought's sociality. It truly is 'no internal thing' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 183). Thus, juxtaposition opens up an alternative way of being in which the subject/object division simply doesn't function, in which fluidity as a mode of thought (to recall Jarvis's assertions earlier in this chapter) is the guiding principle. Joining 'these burgeoning days' to 'promise' to the ' "old bones" ' to the gardener is that mode in action – Jarvis's 'thinking through making'.

Accordingly, there is no hierarchy of interest in this passage as in the whole poem; statements merge into each other in a mobile, restless, constantly changing flow of thought which suggests that the delineation of boundaries is not a concern. Furthermore, it isn't certain because of this where world ends and train of thought begins, and this makes it

difficult to discern in the poem which is causing the other: is it perception which prompts the comment or comment which provokes perception? This is distinctly ‘mesh’-like – indeed, chiasmic.

The lightness with which thought is introduced is not only evident in the humour of such statements as the one selected above, but in frequent, seemingly ‘throwaway’ statements or everyday observations that often follow generalizations. Consider the poem’s ending:

[...] Is it for miracles  
 We live? I like it when the morning sun lights up my room  
 Like a yellow jelly bean, an inner glow. May mutters, “Why  
 Ask questions?” or “What are the questions you wish to ask?”  
 (op. cit., p. 223)

There is a lack of ‘preciousness’ about this, just as throughout the whole poem; nowhere is there a sense that the language of poetry must be special (although this passage is undeniably poetry and remarkable for its comparison between sunlit room and confectionary). The juxtaposition of an existential question with the simplicity of ‘I like it’ does much to deflate any potential pomposity in that question, and is characteristic of Schuyler’s lightness of touch. And how much more light to end the poem with two alternative questions (allowing the reader to discover in passing that May, summer, has finally arrived), the second acting as a generous corrective to the first, and as a mischievous outward-turning to the reader.

The bathetic impulse occurs again and again, often introducing a moment of lightness immediately after a statement which seems to build towards the momentous:

The sun shines on my hand  
 And the myriad lines that criss-cross tell the story of nearly fifty  
 Years. Sorry, it’s too long to relate. Once when I was young [...]
 (op. cit., pp. 214-5)

Here we are prepared for the story of a life, its import further emphasized by the separation of ‘fifty years’ by the line break and the consequent weight placed on each word. But this story is ‘too long’, and its seriousness is punctured by an apology that appears off-hand by contrast. That the poem then swerves into an anecdote from that very life story further underlines the humour, which is also emphasized by that line’s bouncy progression:

**Years.** ~ | **Sorry,** | it’s **too** | **long** to re|**late.** ~ | **Once** when | **I** was | **young,** I

Whatever scansion of the first part of this line are possible, they are likely to resolve after the central caesura into that shown above. The consonance of *s* and *t* sounds, the pararhyming ‘long’ and ‘young’ also contribute to the resolution into rhythmic focus, and the line skips off towards the teasing pause before the verb attached to ‘I’. Colloquial speech flits in and out of metre in this line and in doing so, is transformed by its segmentations into both the performance of a life-story and commentary upon its telling; this reflexivity is produced by the interactions of rhythm with meaning and as such is a clear example of Jarvis’s ‘thinking in verse’. The phrases used may well be familiar and ‘everyday’, but they are transformed into Valéry’s dance – here around enjoyment of story-telling and sociability, the humour in self-deprecation and the pleasures and dramas of address and interlocution.

‘Hymn to Life’ has many such moments of reflexivity where it offers and then withdraws from taking a particular direction of thought. One further example also demonstrates that the text’s echoes of other literary texts are part of that. Consider this discussion of the periwinkle,

a retiring flower loved,

It would seem, of the dead, so often found where they congregate. A  
Quote from Aeschylus: I forget. All, all is forgotten gradually and  
One wonders if these ideas that seem handed down are truly what they were?  
An idea may mutate like a plant, and what was once held basic truth  
Become an idle thought, like, “Shall we plant some periwinkles there  
By that bush? They’re so to be depended on.”

(op. cit., p. 216)

Just as with ‘Sorry, it’s too long to relate’ in the previous excerpt, ‘I forget’ punctures and deflates the grandeur of its own meditation upon death, and redirects the poem’s thought along a parallel but different track. The emotional intensity of ‘All, all is forgotten’ is diffused, just as the passage of time diffuses the strength of certain ideas, ideas such as those Aeschylus held, which is surely this excerpt’s point. From a meditation upon death and memory to ‘an idle thought’; it is discussed and enacted here.

This is a significant moment, contrasting – as the whole poem does – death with life, and considering what remains of the life lived. Schuyler’s poem is aptly named a ‘Hymn’, for it is indeed a song of praise, and a counterweight to the ‘whited Washington’ (op. cit., p. 223) of Schuyler’s childhood (recalling the ‘whited sepulchre’ of the *King James Bible*<sup>56</sup>) – which haunts this poem. Even Washington, D.C., with its State monuments and ‘dead men’s bones’ (Matthew, 23: 27), and its testimony to public lives and acts cannot completely challenge the effacing effects of linear time:

And there the Lincoln Memorial crumbles. It looks so solid: it won’t  
Last. The impermanence of permanence, is that all there is?

(Schuyler, 1993, p. 217)

Against this, ‘Hymn to Life’ offers a vision of time as cyclical, rather than linear, anchored in the preciousness of moment-by-moment experience.

that same blue jay returns, or perhaps

It is another. All jays are one to me. But not the sun which seems at  
Each rising new, as though in the night it enacted death and rebirth,  
As flowers seem to. The roses this June will be different roses  
Even though you cut an armful and come in saying, “Here are the roses,”  
As though the same blooms had come back [...]

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<sup>56</sup> Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. (Matthew 23: 27)

(op. cit., p. 215)

The reassurance of seasonal migration, of plants that are able to flower anew because their growth from the previous year has withered and died, the sun which disappears and reappears at the horizon; these are what continue after individual death. This ‘Hymn’ is Schuyler’s monument; monumental in its solid progress down the page, composed not of stone, but verse which seethes with detail and overflows its generous lines. If it contains the helpless acknowledgement that everything in the world exists in time, then in its singing of the endless quotidian it also contains the fleeting, the daily – ‘each so unique, each so alike’ (op. cit., p. 223) – which is the stuff of life; a radical vision of a state of being that is easy to miss in its preference for understatement, humour and bathos. It offers an alternative to the compartmentalization of thoughts and the insistence upon weighty, bounded individuality and in doing so, requires its readers to ‘Attune [ourselves] to what is happening / Now’ (op. cit., p. 219). Schuyler is not so much a poet of the everyday as a poet of everything, who – like Michael Haslam, in his Pennine clough – achieves in his work that ‘continual song out of merely being here’ (Haslam, 2015), and enables his readers to sing it too.

As suggested previously, Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm and flesh have implications on an ethical level for writing about environment. For if we and world are implicated in each other’s experience of each other, if we accept – as this thesis does – that objective understanding of subjective experience isn’t possible, that knowledge is founded on, experienced through the body-self – which consumes, interacts, dies, which thinks of itself through socially constructed concepts of interiority and exteriority – and if we accept that there is no separately walled-off interior, then our behaviour towards and presentation of the more-than-human and the ‘natural’ matters. With respect to creative writing, as we have seen in Chapter Three’s discussion of *Edgelands* and its artistic predecessors and relatives, aesthetic effect isn’t enough. One can see a way in which even Michael Haslam’s ‘song out of merely being here’ threatens to become too supine. Aesthetics ought to have an ethical dimension. What is compelling about both Haslam and Schuyler is the awareness that the more ‘beautiful’ aspects – the pleasure-giving, lyric aspects – of their work are inclusive in what they value and implicated as reciprocal participants in their perceptions of and interactions with environment. In this, it would be possible to align them with

pastoral's *otium* as respite and implicit critique, but for the fact that both poets seem to take their troubles with them into the sylvan glade, fields and pasture – and that said locales cannot be seen as so very separate from the built environments and/or societal demands and concerns they might critique.

Above all, though, Schuyler's work compels in the same way that Haslam's work compels; because it speaks to the poetics we explored at the start of this chapter. In very different ways to Haslam's 'Old Hall Down in the Hollow' (2010, pp. 31-8, considered in Chapter Two), 'Hymn to Life' is full of the same de-centring impulse. Hence, for example, Schuyler's frequent recourse to questions, which puncture the certainty of any statements and open them out to the reader. Schuyler's is a social poetics, connecting reported speech, questions, ordinary or familiar language and addresses to an interlocutor, yet through his verse practices he manages to topple the (self) importance of the human individual. Instead – and despite the noted urban (and urbane) sociability of Schuyler's verse – we are in a territory that Morton would recognize as the 'mesh' – and a way of thinking about that territory that is chiasmic and feral. In this territory, individuals (and their thought) are not separated and certainly not placed in any hierarchy of categorization. Flora, fauna, human, built, grown; all are equally valued, equally in relation to a perceiving body-self which turns its attention now this way, now that along the chiasmic Möbius strip.<sup>57</sup> If Forrest-

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<sup>57</sup> I am appropriating this metaphor from Lacan – where the Möbius strip figures as the subject – via Grosz, who adapts it thus:

The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another. This model also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside. (1994, p. xii)

Thomson's 'third area' is intermittently imaginable, in those moments when we forget our categorizations into binaries and attend instead with 'bafflement' to that which overflows and tramples between them, then 'Hymn to Life' is a remarkably consistent imagining, a generous and kindly overflowing and trampling. It is populated by 'the others who haunt me and whom I haunt; the "others" along *with* whom I haunt a single, present and actual Being' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 161). And just as Forrest-Thomson demands, the 'third area' is accessed through the poem's technique: those long lines; the segmentations effected by the line breaks and the use of upper case letters at the start of each new line and – within the line – by juxtaposition, to name but a few. Reading 'Hymn to Life', we are, like Schuyler, 'thinking in verse'. And to think in verse, through the poem's unfolding of its making, is also to think ferally.

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It is this 'torsion' that I choose to emphasize in Grosz's adaptation, rather than the Cartesian mind/body categories that – even while they are challenged – remain in place in this excerpt from her work.



## Chapter Five: *Natural Phenomena*

This last section discusses the poetry collection that accompanies this critical study, placing it against the key arguments encountered. Firstly, I will consider how *Natural Phenomena* manifests the construct of ‘nature’ favoured here; one that includes the human de-centred (as encountered in Chapter Two’s discussion of Michael Haslam’s *A Cure for Woodness*, 2010), that takes account of the human impact upon the globe, and that expands to take in all locations, whether sub/urban or rural. Next, I will turn to the collection’s representation of interiority. Chapters One and Two called into doubt the type of interiority inherent in Alice Oswald’s poem, ‘Woods etc.’ (2005, p. 7), which co-opts everything into its own dominant narrative and which is predicated upon the strict separation and opposition of subject/object, where the more-than-human is denied any kind of agency even as its ‘inaccessibility’ frustrates. I discovered that, ironically, ‘inaccessibility’ does more than signal the ‘natural’ world’s alterity; it points towards the agency existing within that very alterity – but as discussed in Chapter One, Oswald at that early stage in her writing does not take this up. This chapter asks what impact the alternative conceptualization proposed in Chapter Two, drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic relation between body-self and world, has had upon the creative section of this thesis.

Finally, I will consider *Natural Phenomena* against the feral. Is it possible to transfer ferality, the term developed in this study for a dynamic, oscillating mode of critical thought, to creative – poetic – thought? And what do poems written ferally look like? What techniques do they deploy? What compositional processes might proceed from a feral poetics? The fact that, throughout this study, I have placed the feral against aesthetics and even – as part of those aesthetics – a ‘lang-scape’, indicates its suitability for poetics. Indeed, I would assert that the feral is ideally a creative-critical mode of thinking; associative, furthering its argument as it weaves between poles it does not dismantle so much as unravel. Like a fox tugging at a scrap hanging down from a rubbish bin, it might topple the bin, it might not. It will certainly unsettle the bin; it will definitely take what it needs and run. Given their rootedness in the history of human thought (and with little sign of imminent disappearance, based on the texts encountered in this study), the complete dissolution of binary poles such as wild/tame, mind/body is unlikely. This is not to suggest

that the attempt to do so will yield nothing, but more to propose that any alternative to binarizing – such as Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s ‘third area’ – is contingent, partially imaginable. This is the case with pastoral’s *otium*, as we saw in Chapter Two. However, with an oscillating movement, a pause on the borders, it is possible to impact upon those poles – if not erode them, then perhaps mutate them, unravel them somewhat, make their edges more ragged, more liable to ingress, untidiness, complications – more liable to ferality, in other words. Furthermore, thinking ferally removes the focus from those poles; indeed, as we have seen in Chapter Four, the truly feral finds those poles irrelevant, doesn’t recognize them. It is the edgelands between them that become more interesting, more important.

Such is the argument of this thesis, and it has taken us leaping ahead. Still holding in mind the question of feral’s impact upon the creative section, I shall begin with the construct of ‘nature’ that animates *Natural Phenomena*. Chapter Three discussed in some detail the locale to which I write, and the wish not to cast that environment in some New Baroque or Georgian light, to recall Patrick Wright (2009). The title itself was chosen to signal the collection’s concerns; both the phenomenology that fuels its conceptualization of interiority, and its presentation of ‘nature’. Given that ‘natural phenomena’ usually refers to occurrences such as the aurora borealis or the germination of seeds, the title acquires a touch of irony with the appearance of poems such as ‘The Lift’ and ‘Mall’, that take as their subject matter aspects of the built, urban environment. Both the title and the sequencing of poems complicate and question ‘nature’; such is the primary project of this creative part of the PhD.

Although the poems in *Natural Phenomena* respond to a ‘nature’ recognizable from my readings of Timothy Morton (2009) and Kathleen Jamie (2008, 2012a), they are also a record of the development of that concept. This is evident in a poem written at the start the period of study, such as ‘The Fragile’, where in contrast to the assertions of Chapter Three (and indeed to the reciprocity discovered in the work of Michael Haslam and James Schuyler), ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are in opposition. The city, as ‘culture’, is an entity identified mostly by its sounds, and the buildings menace (‘rising from shadow to nothing’). As a representative of ‘nature,’ the cormorant has agency and autonomy, deftly avoiding the ‘moored hulls’ in order to fish in the water of which it ‘flips’ in and out. But the title, against which the cormorant is counterposed, works against that impression, suggesting this

contentment is misplaced. Furthermore, the water hides sinister ‘cable ends’ and is enigmatic in its opacity; like the ‘shadow’ which ends the poem, both obscuring and suggesting threat. The children, connected by association with the title and thus with the cormorant, can also be read as ‘natural’ – and the poem also implies their vulnerability with the statement ‘They grin in the street at anyone’. ‘The Fragile’, in making use of familiar associations of children with vulnerability and cities with danger, expresses anxiety about the effects of the human upon ‘nature’ but the manner in which it does this collapses its thinking back into the ‘beautiful soul’ syndrome that afflicts some environmentally-aware writing, as identified by Timothy Morton and noted in Chapter Three (Morton, 2009, p. 117). In opposing ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, this poem elides the complexities of both.

However, this tendency does not dominate the collection. Elsewhere, an expanded ‘nature’ is presented, where tree roots ‘buckle the tarmac’ (in ‘Walks’), swifts are juxtaposed not only with clouds but with tower blocks (in the same poem), and building sites stand on the page alongside fields and native British trees (in ‘5 Delays’). This is more than mere aesthetic set-dressing however, for in the use – or avoidance of use – of pronouns (particularly the first person), I have attempted to achieve the de-centring of the human seen in Michael Haslam’s *A Cure for Woodness* (2010); testimony to the effect of his collection upon my critical and poetic thinking.

Such is the dance that pronouns perform that both their avoidance and inclusion can be deployed in this de-centring impulse. I will consider shortly their avoidance – a dominant strategy in *Natural Phenomena* – in connection with the representation of interiority and the demotion of the human to the role of reciprocal inhabitant of environment. In this following example, though, the first person is present, yet still to de-centring effect. Thus the fifth line of ‘Walks’ runs as follows: ‘my hand on the bark: sweet chestnut in full fruit’. Although, elsewhere in the poem, the first person is avoided (the reasons for this avoidance here and elsewhere in the collection are discussed below), but here its use is intended to present the ‘hand’ as an object of the gaze, with the same status as tree bark. The momentary bloom of self-identity created by ‘my’ introduces also a moment of surprise: the body-self appears and then disappears in the text just as the chestnut tree does. In addition, it is worth pointing out that, if the phrase were ‘hand on the bark’, a ghost of the verb ‘to hand’ (as in to hand over or to hand on to) arises; to avoid that, ‘my’ is attached to the noun. Ironic, then, that in acting to de-centre it, I have used a

marker of human dominance. This is a paradox, just as in Michael Haslam's description of 'nature', discussed in Chapter Two, where the irrevocable impact of the human can be found in the habitat destruction and species decline signalled by the 'rhododendron' and 'mistle thrush', but where the description itself acts to demote humanity by demonstrating the autonomy of the other lives in its 'Pennine garden delph' (2010, p. 11).

As this study has been teasing out, interiority and its fluidity, its chiasmic relation with the world, is strongly evident when one investigates constructs of and representations of environment, so it is unsurprising that questions of each bleed into questions of the other. Indeed, one of the features of such a reciprocal mode of interiority is an environment which seems responsive. Chapter Two showed this in its discussion of Michael Haslam's understanding of his locale through language and the way in which, in writing to his locale, it spoke to him ('cries to be used': 2010, p. 7). In *Natural Phenomena* it can be found, for example, in the relation of 'natural' features to the 'I' of 'Meteor'; the 'fog' is 'mild in its enquiry'. This environment is both responsive and responded to, as trees and river are addressed in a rhetorical manoeuvre that I can now recognize as classic apostrophe.

As already suggested, the question of interiority and how and where it resides expresses itself in poetic practice through *Natural Phenomena's* differing deployments of the first person. As discovered in Chapter One's reading, my initial 'recoil' away from 'I' in my own creative work met in Alice Oswald's poem an 'oracular' tone which I have aligned with the imperative towards demonstrating competence and control over poetic technique. This initial frustration with such a tone and the overwhelming effect of that imperative upon 'Woods etc.' may have mellowed somewhat, but it has since given way to the awareness that, for a poet attempting to write environment, a whole coercive grammar of pronouns can threaten to introduce a set of relations, a framework, which would obscure and overwhelm the mutual 'civil regard' (Jamie, 2012, p. 16) characteristic of a more fluid and chiasmic relation with the world.

My scepticism about the first person finds two expressions in the poetic technique of *Natural Phenomena*; an engagement directly with the question of person and its establishment, and the avoidance of pronoun use briefly discussed above. The former can be found particularly in 'Autumn Exemplar', 'Relevé' and 'First Person'. 'Autumn Exemplar' makes use of an implied 'you', which is the self, which is a leaf. The fragments of reported speech ('*the thing about me is ... I felt like ...*') introduce irony around such

statements intended to shore up a sense of individuality, and satirize the attempt to lay claim to any assertions that might be definitively ‘mine’. It has a partner-poem in ‘Relevé’, which again satirizes acts of self-assertion, not least through the title, which refers to the repeated action in ballet where a dancer rises to balance en pointe. ‘First Person’ seeks to unsettle the stability of the first person by its rapid deployment of a series of semantically non-consecutive statements. As each ‘I’ connected to those statements arises and falls away, it becomes difficult to attribute each to one, unified deictic centre. Ironically, in its critique of the impulse to ascribe a stable set of attributes to an identity, it provides a list of details which do just that; build a set of attributes – although many of these elements seem absurd or contradictory.

The second aspect of this scepticism towards pronoun use involved the omission altogether of this word class. This technique dovetailed with several others in the service of expressing the fluid interiority explored in Chapter Two of this study. For example, ‘Walks’ makes a series of note-like observations, in which thought and memory merge with descriptions of environment. Fragmentary statements represent articulated thoughts arising and passing in the mind; the full, Standard English, grammatical sentence is truncated in favour of the phrase or clause. As observed in Chapter One’s reading of Oswald’s poem (2005, p. 7), which has been so influential upon my critical and creative thought, this note-like structure in concert with the omission of ‘I’ creates a sense of intimacy with the experience described. In ‘Walks’, the only pronouns used are those that indicate a subject of memory. It is interesting that despite the omission of the first person, the deictic centre in this poem remains relatively stable. This is true, too, of ‘5 Delays’, which uses the same poetic techniques (use of phrases and clauses rather than grammatically complete sentences, omission of the first person). In both poems, the reader – aided by the titles – is able to ascribe a context to each of the utterances within. The destabilizing effect that can occur by exploiting the way in which ‘“pronomial” forms do not refer to “reality” or to “objective” positions in space or time but to the utterance, unique each time, that contains them’ (Benveniste, 1971, p. 219) isn’t dominantly explored in this collection. What is made use of is the way in which ‘I’ can be deployed to ironic effect and the way in which its omission can affect the register – and therefore the tone – of a piece. In its creation of the effect of portentousness or – to be slightly more generous – authority, repetition of the first person can render the ‘I’ vulnerable to satire. If the omission of the first person can

remove the ‘wild spot’ similar to that observed by William Waters (2003, p. 15); that ‘dynamically moving gap’ (ibid) where the reader is momentarily disconcerted as to her positioning by the poem, then it can also create an impression of immediacy. For all the discussion of those fruitful moments of ‘bafflement’ (Jarvis, 2010b, p. 282), it is the values of immediacy and intimacy that have won out in this collection. This is due to the intention to convey interiority’s fluidity and porosity.

The importance of this intention can be seen in ‘Simultaneous Incessant’, which presents the phenomenon of sound and the body-self’s inability to control hearing. In Part One of this poem the deictic centre slides from item to item in a list of sounds and utterances punctuated only by line breaks. Yet that impression is interrupted and the reader is recalled by the repeated phrase ‘I, now, here’ to the role of listener. In the second part, which considers human speech, there is also the blending of interiority (in the form of articulated thought and memory) with environment – but this too, towards the end of the poem, is anchored to an individual awareness which notes and responds to what is heard. Whilst the warping of prose grammatical conventions may disconcert in this poem, the periodic restoration of the deictic centre reassures.

Another way of approaching interiority is to consider compositional process. It is in discussing this, too, that it’s possible to discern how *Natural Phenomena* makes use of poetry’s operating alongside ‘ordinary language’, its indication of the ‘third area’, to recall both Paul Valéry and Veronica Forrest-Thomson from earlier in this chapter. To discuss several poems as compositional ‘case studies’ should make this clearer.

‘Berg’ is one of the first results of a change in the compositional process. A draft was divided into individual words, and any repetitions discarded. Navigating by consonant and assonant ‘chiming’, words were strung together until a series of phrases had emerged. These ‘phrases’ were not necessarily semantically logical, though a structural pattern of *adjective + noun* did predominantly occur during other uses of this process (and was often resisted). In ‘Berg’, the phrases were then aligned with each other, again navigating by consonance and assonance, and additional words inserted according to the line of argument – or at that early stage of the poem’s assembly, a narrative – that seemed to appear. In order to arrive at a completed draft, associative connotations were pursued in order to insert these additional words. Line breaks were created according to cadence and visual impact; the intention was to create a berg-like shape on the page.

Other poems where the compositional process began like that of ‘Berg’ are ‘Grotto’ and ‘Enumerations’: a poem draft was cut up into pieces and reconstituted, firstly as consonant/assonant groups of words and then as ‘strings’ that became, eventually, lines of poetry. In the case of *Natural Phenomena* this adapted ‘collaging’<sup>58</sup> has varying results; sometimes producing a poem that has travelled far – in terms of subject matter as well as technique, though it’s dangerous to mention the two separately, given the preceding discussion about poetic thought as a mode – from the original draft. Sometimes the poem failed to escape its origins, demonstrating the hold of the original articulation; it was often the materiality of the words as sequenced in the original which held sway. Where this was the case, the poem often broke down into lists of words in order to preserve the diction. ‘Grotto’ for example, illustrates one of the other tendencies that occurs with this process, which is to produce lines of poetry consisting only of lists (‘secret fires, plush lights and calling, walkways / tough glades, thickets, echoes, coiled tunnels’).

‘Enumerations’ was developed from the same material as ‘Walks’, but – unlike ‘Walks’ – was composed, drafted and edited with an emphasis on process rather than on the outcome itself. A particular way of looking acted as a frame upon the note-taking which provided the poetic material with which to work – hence the poem’s three sections; ‘Looking Up’, ‘Looking Down’ and ‘Tea Hut Enumeration’. Composed in the weeks immediately following a bereavement, the ‘Enumerations’ began as a response to the experience of being barely articulate, but of finding articulated thought occurring anyway, in meeting one’s environment. The by-now familiar process of breaking that material down into individual words and then piecing them together, using sound association as a guide, was used – but I stopped short of drafting the material further, arriving at a series of word lists, and it is possible to see the resultant prose poems as the paradoxical enlanguaging of bereavement’s cognitive interruptions. This is a particularly intense demonstration of the way in which interiority surfaces in language. Another aspect of the poem also demonstrates this – as well as further underlining interiority’s chiasmic relation with environment.

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<sup>58</sup> For an account of one of my peers’ adaptation of the collage process, see Borg (2008). This account has strongly influenced my own compositional methods.

The poems contain a mixture of precise and general terms for flora and fauna. The emotional and cognitive experience of bereavement is articulated in the non-sequential appearance of the phrases which appear in more than one poem in this collection; ‘nothing’, ‘no answer’. Filling the spaces around such scant articulation are the names of the more-than-human; the poem enacts an induction back into language, back into relation with environment via the taxonomic – via a construction of ‘nature’. If the emotional and mental terrain of bereavement shifts, or appears suddenly bordered, then a physical terrain could reassert itself, brought back into reassuring solidity by its names – and chiasmically, language too can reassert itself through the relation between perceiver and world. In this, the influence of Michael Haslam’s work is writ large: just as his ‘continual song’ (2015) is present to and makes present his locale through language, so too, here.

The experience of drafting some of the poems in this collection matched very strongly Simon Jarvis’s description of ‘thinking through making’ (2010a, p. 934). For example, ‘Although’ consists of a seven stanza conditional sentence, in which the apodosis is deferred until the penultimate stanza. This rhetorical-grammatical structure was adopted at the start of composition and the experience was of being conducted along a route already known, of ‘hearing’ where the poem would go next. Sound – particularly its rhythmic aspect – laid down the course of the articulated thought in the imagination. Perhaps this is not surprising; after all, as a rhetorical form, the conditional sentence is a conduit of argument. It is in this mode that the poem addresses its ‘lost’.

Two other poems – ‘Grotto’, which shadows the sonnet form, and ‘5 Postcards’, where practices of metrical scansion were used early on in composition – also demonstrate in differing ways the truth of Jarvis’s assertion about the distinct mode of thought that poetry demands. Despite its compositional origin as a variant on the ‘collage’ process (Borg, 2008), ‘Grotto’ contains a volta and gradated indents (indicating lines with a shorter number of stresses than the standard five). Metrical scansion was used to arrive at line breaks. This last strategy arose because of the rhythmic imperative arising from the lists of words the compositional process habitually produced (discussed above). That imperative in turn suggested grammatical structures to be made from those lists. The practical deliberation involved in drafting and shaping the material into a variety of twenty-first century sonnet may well be experienced as ‘technical’ concerns only, with thoughts about the subject matter coming second, but these concerns are part and parcel of ‘thinking



through making' as well as 'thinking in verse'; in other words, are productive of and products of poetry's thought.

Likewise, '5 Postcards' was assembled from observational notes, some in phrase form, some in full sentences. The dominance of an iambic rhythm in these fragments prompted the building of iambic pentameter lines, the subsequent shaping of these lines into regular stanzas and the choice of title – which in turn suggested the poem's thought-journey. These examples demonstrate the intertwining of poetic technique with poetic thought; it is present from the earliest stage of composition. My use of the term 'intertwining' indicates another chiasmic relation, and it's possible to say that this activity, poetic composition, is a feral activity, also – on which, more presently.

This critical study has already asserted that poetry is an art form which uses language in a distinct set of operations whereby diction that would, elsewhere, be 'everyday' produces articulated thinking that is most decidedly different to 'everyday' prose. In this it follows Paul Valéry (1958). Even in poetry that appears to use prose grammatical conventions, everyday utterances (for example, reported speech) and/or the sequential logic of argument or narrative, the 'third area' (Forrest-Thomson, 1978) is still present. This has already been seen in James Schuyler's 'Hymn to Life' (1993, pp. 214-223), but it would be fruitful to investigate whether Valéry and Schuyler have left an influence upon *Natural Phenomena*.

'Charentais' is itself a response to Schuyler's work. In particular, the ending emulates the lightness of 'throwaway' or 'banal' statements discovered in James Schuyler's poems, often juxtaposed against a more weighty or general statement. In addition, the repetition of the first person contains mild irony, juxtaposed against the mundane, everyday actions described which belong to a very specific socio-cultural group. This irony is a milder version of the sarcasm and rebuttal to creations of self-identity found in 'Relevé' and 'Autumn Exemplar', and less skittishly ebullient than the rebuttals found in 'First Person'. Again, in this it emulates Schuyler. Furthermore, upon consideration of its composition, it's clear that 'Charentais', like Schuyler's work, amply demonstrates the truth of Valéry's and Forrest-Thomson's statements.

The completed poem's layout initially resembled a melon shape as lines were indented and broken, but this placed too much weight upon the poem as a whole, making the utterances seem 'forced' and portentous. This effect of tone was created because the

line breaks slowed the poem's pace, placing greater weight on statements that appear non-sequential and banal. This effect intensified towards the ending, which proceeded in lines of shorter and shorter length. Returning the poem to a prose arrangement introduced a more rapid onward flow into the series of statements, removing the effect of pomposity and instead conveying an experience of interiority where thoughts arise and fall away. Furthermore, the statements' oblique relations to each other enable the poem to simultaneously hide and allude to emotional distress in a way that is decidedly Schuyleresque.

The most obvious poem to consider in relation to the everyday is 'Transit'; seven pages of reported speech, fragmented and intercut with descriptions of sensory phenomena, indented and arranged according to rhythmic pace rather than, for example, attributable speakers. It is not presented as a script, although it was composed for several voices and sounds. Composing the poem, I was influenced by two related works; T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1974, pp. 61-86) – from which I derived the practice of introducing separate 'voices' and their narratives which fade in and out and are linked by a narrator or chorus figure – and Lavinia Greenlaw's *Audio Obscura* (2011), a site-specific work developed with ArtAngel for London St. Pancras station, from which I derived the concept of mixing ambient, environmental sounds with voices. The poem's material was collected while travelling on London's public transport systems: hearing conversations gradually appear and disappear; utterances being interrupted and effectively stopped by louder noises than the human voice, or utterances interrupting each other; glimpsing a street or the sky through curved or smeared windows. The attempt to represent such effects on the page led to the emergence of a rhythm that in turn dictated a pace – and this in turn had an effect upon the diction chosen. Thus the fragments may well be 'ordinary', but their arrangement builds a whole out of those pieces that has its own 'logic' and momentum.

One can't help but be conscious, in reading *Natural Phenomena*, that its poems vary in the techniques they deploy. This reflects the fact that the collection is a record of discovery, as a range of poetics and poetries was encountered during the course of this study; a record of my 'thinking through making' (Jarvis, 2010a, p. 933) in different modes. Thus, there is the discovery that poetic thought need not take on prosody only; another and equal mode of poetic thought (though to present it as such is to suggest too strongly that

these were choices deliberately articulated at the time of composition and redrafting) is that arrived at through considerations of layout.

As I moved through composing my own work, I was involved in neither the solely prosodic work of verse-making (as described by Simon Jarvis), nor solely in the work of thinking through the visual presentation of words as entities in themselves. This latter compositional method was encountered in the work of American Modernists such as H.D. (1996) and Lorine Niedecker (2002), both of whose poetry has opened up a wider range of poetics to me during the course of this study. I distinguish between these branches of poetics, ‘thinking in verse’ and ‘thinking through layout’, in order to account for the variety contained in the collection that accompanies this study. Both share an intense engagement with the sonic impact of language upon the reader. Both are distinct from prosaic modes of thought – and both are present in *Natural Phenomena*.

Yet even this discussion is too suggestive of a prosaic or ‘logical’ deliberation upon the creative portion of this thesis. Because the poetic is a different mode of thought to that of prose – and very starkly different to that employed in critical prose – it can be misleading to discuss the ‘poetics’ of a poetry collection. There is a gap between what goes on when we talk about poems and what goes on when we write them, and I wouldn’t advocate the attempt to close it, though attempts to bridge it – unsuccessful as they might be – are illuminating and helpful in sharpening one’s critical thought, and can help confirm one’s certainty about the value of pursuing whatever poetry project is current. Does the development of a poetics produce a poetry? I think not. My experience is that the former arrives retrospectively; reflecting back on one’s practice is, after all, merely a prelude to writing the next poem and can seek to synthesize what was experienced as far more ragged and uncertain than any manifesto that might appear after the event.

This is why poetic composition is feral. There is a contingent, ‘snatch and grab’ element in the piecing-together of its lines, the collecting of its component words, working in balance with the more deliberate intention to structure; a ragged provisionality in navigating one’s way through a draft – and this can continue right through to the stage of arranging poems in a sequence. For example, in sequencing this collection, I initially navigated by emotional tenor as much as by theme; a scarcely-articulated strategy that presented itself as going by a poem’s ‘feel’. This, too, is evidence of the ferality of writing poetry, of the gap between a poetics and the poetry to which it attaches itself.

This thesis has discovered the body-self's chiasmic relation with environment and the existence of a 'nature' that confounds such oppositions as wild/tame, grown/built or indeed human/non-human. These discoveries are paralleled with the presentation of a critical strategy that makes use of the edgelands between such oppositions. The study has introduced the concept of the feral to denote just such a mode of critical thought to which those very oppositions are irrelevant, and has considered the implications of the types of interiority and environment it favours for poetic practice. From the evidence provided by the accompanying poetry collection, this has resulted in poetic techniques that are in keeping with the literary strategies advocated in Timothy Morton's study of ecological aesthetics (2009) as discussed in Chapter Three. These are techniques, for example, such as the eschewing of prose punctuation conventions, the use of fragmentary statements and the non sequitur – and a stronger reliance on layout, elision and compression. The poems of *Natural Phenomena* vary, refusing to settle either upon metrical or free verse composition, deictic stability or mobility, narrative linearity or indeterminacy. Far from decaying into dilettantism, this stylistic mobility is in keeping with a feral poetics. The strength and effect of that poetics can be seen in the compositional process's development, as discussed in this chapter. A uniform body of poetry, then, is neither what I am able nor what I wish to present. The collection carries the history of my reading and thinking and brings into language my contingent, ragged, disparate experience of interiority and its feral lang-scape.

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# Natural Phenomena

*In memory of*  
*Tara Few*  
*(22.03.68 – 11.08.13)*



**I**

**Palace**

Ash grotto, rain hall, fallen night labyrinth,  
demolished Palace, diminishing  
remember-ruin, ripped, defaced:  
repeat in slow motion, a razed  
echo. A frill, a smoke skirt, a wall  
sag, then sliding façade.  
Flame flowers in a corner, wraps a pall.  
Lost turret cupola, splintering wreck proscenium,  
shattered reverb, chord fallen apart,  
all frequencies  
flying loose, tremolo fading,  
all the burnt language degraded  
to fuzz: Palace, this your ghost,  
your not-music.

**Walks**

crows hold open their beaks    heat and bleached grass

housemartins skimming their dark green reflections

nothing    no answer

\*

a soft clearing    leaf sprays, squirrel-nipped

my hand on the bark: sweet chestnut in full fruit

\*

dragon fly at eye level    water mint in flower

grey heron, low over the lake

marsh pennywort

\*

everywhere, the wind    dogwalkers calling

to keep her

here, fresh in the mind

woodpecker knocking, power saw

\*

uprooted, fallen, ripped at the crown

rubble, wooden slats tussock and peaty mud  
 crisp, floating bits off a bonfire  
 chainsawed branches

her voice

her way of sighing, expelling the air through her nose

birdcalls overlapping, like trees

\*

magpies against a bone-cold sky  
 flat commonplace of absence

roots buckle the tarmac

the shock preserves but then the shock subsides

hazel tassle, starling chitter, frost

\*

woodpeckers, clear weather, the muddy path  
 again

into a strong, straight seam of air

\*

tyres on the wet road  
 sun through cloud her birthday month

a door opens and shuts on a child singing  
 ladder rattle bluebell

\*

dislodged petal   wood pigeon  
 feeding on leaf buds  
                                  wing clap, arc

white-tailed bumblebee

\*

thin fox ahead   a cry forced out  
 no wind, no answer

\*

grasshoppers, loud in the stems, the feathery tips   hips  
 on a wild rose

peacock, monarch, gatekeeper, small copper

swifts against a thundercloud  
    the tower blocks' regard

\*

quiet bird, sharp wings, thin tail  
 steering, fast

this hammer, tapping  
                                  lone sound in a quarry

## Although

there's no telling, no hearing and that's not the point  
which I know, even when turning to look at the clothes horse in front  
of the cupboard where sometimes it's you, white arms by your sides;

although it's obvious why things get lost (house keys, pens,  
my glasses, my socks), that patience is owed until they're tossed  
back from the ether at the whim of the Emperor of Voids;

although there are no more plans to tear down the bookshelves,  
set fire to the room, torch the park, torch the wood, torch the whole  
fucking city – no more motherless daughters or daughterless mothers,

instead just concrete unending, or stumps, barbed wire and ruin  
or annul the whole lot in one clean, decisive, hydrogen pop:  
there, gone, no more to trouble us all –

although, weathered grey, I walk in my clothes and smile  
and can name you in public as if in passing  
enough.

Every day nothing, no answer; a lack which has made itself  
at home in this room, in the park, sick of whispers. That's  
enough, dear lost, dear gone, enough, we surpass you –

one birthday, another – and still the grit on my hands  
in the rain, still the plaque by the tree, you persist, you are void  
and the void persists although it is never enough.

**Dovestone**

to slake the thirst of a city: this reservoir  
roots anchor a hillside

our slow party proceeding, we help lift a buggy  
the children: *I'm mad for mermaids*

wet through but still we stand  
the open face of water chopped rough by rain

the catch on the gate, slippery then sun the air  
moves freely down the valley

a train, a chimney cap, a railway bridge  
dual carriageway

it's done wake to the blur of daylight, the room,  
a hand on the face or arm

the curtain, the chair, the books and piles of paper  
allow the cup of coffee

up there: sapling rows in uncut grass  
the great loaves of cloud

## 7 Visits

a pale cave sand projectors

in each: the past  
the images like running water on the walls

and she is here  
doesn't know why, for how long

\*

her decorated skin: clear amber lozenges  
dark blue silence

\*

outside a shop and so much younger  
faintly her  
a dropped till receipt the wind

\*

we need entrance money  
she can't find the right change and we're laughing  
*here* I shove the silver coins at her  
piecing them out of her bag

\*

a long table and at the end  
amongst others

she rises: grey satin, red hair coil across her shoulder  
giant like the goddesses and smiling

imagine if Athena heard you praying



\*

a station        halls, bridges, tunnels  
far down a corridor, amongst others

she is smiling, she is running

*can you stay?*

a marigold, between two paving slabs

just the stalk, discarded petals  
orange dust around the crevice

\*

I spread into sleep    accompanied by evening barbecues  
the dim warm of a summer    the sun hardly behind the hills

woodsmoke    no, 'Sandalwood'

a stick of incense at the glimmer boundary

**Meteor**

Fog, this morning, at the window  
mild in its inquiry.

Yes, I say, it's true.

River in spate, trees taking on her colours.

How is it the news has reached you only now?

Back then, we missed the Perseids crossing.  
There was cloud. We were asleep.

## Green Alkanet

From the hot flank of the bus to the pavement lunch between meetings  
in the dazed, hot, infinite day of August:  
green alkanet in profusion, persistent, taken for granted  
on verges, between brick wall and tarmac,  
on vacant sites, untended beds.

The hairy, blistered leaves, the robust, fluted stalk;  
green alkanet stands as you must stand, stares  
as you must stare, with clarity brewed in a white,  
day-for-night pupil where world is altered, reversed,  
with a blue, pitiless iris – the same, blue  
intensity dragging you, thrashing, coarse, shining,  
as grasses go on waving, hair goes on growing,  
as grass withers, hair is cut.

This is how you must bear yourself now:  
upright, impersonal, calm, time-ridden, despite.

**Grotto**

Dark afternoon, the motorway wet  
field and field of shine around the city  
and there, sharp, aching, pushing open  
    pitted by wells of ruby and black:  
domain of glass gout and fall, of stalagmites'  
    rough points, of far spark ceiling.  
I – dissolving – enter as mineral airiness  
    journeying into the deepening hall  
    past dark cavalcades of pillars, pale markings  
entangled shadow, lost forms. Look: we hide  
secret fires, plush lights and calling, walkways  
tough glades, thickets, echoes, coiled tunnels. Like you  
    I carry this place, staidly  
    I walk its intricacies.

## II

**Cicada**

After the engines: the echo-less quiet of Arrivals.

Flat green, grey roads, an avenue of trees.

No shadows – no, everything a shadow.

What a conundrum, this new, sharper atmosphere.

It will not admit the creek, fast water over a shallow bed.

It will not admit the pavement, steaming after rain.

It rips away the shadow, moving over the cloud  
under continuous blue.

A blank space, a question mark, split  
carapace, wobbling form.

**First Person**

Silent, unbending, under a trickle of snow,  
I am Duchess of Malfi still  
in plum velvet. I am a pale thought,  
a provisional thing, a point in the dark,  
a red anorak, an old letter, toast crumbs,  
home, ever so entrapping.  
What knobbly vegetable is this? My life,  
like so, arising to lean on the fence  
in an overgrown garden, sit on the roof with a mug  
of wine in party clothes and a coat  
in the morning, simultaneously unfolding  
rooms of music, lipstick, placards,  
fridges, traffic, rucksacks, sheep. I am  
a dot in a city square, weirdness stripped,  
the oblong of night the window admits,  
the mind which scatters and twists away and before me,  
of course, nothing.

### Simultaneous Incessant

*i*

the faint thud felt not heard of the table's  
 uneven leg or a dud plug on the foot  
 rolled off and now, I, here, fluorescents  
 laminate shelving still in the eastern light  
 the clock face bricks red-gold the cars  
 and now, I, here, the desk the glass  
 and voices up and down the stairs crossing  
 siren crossing women calling there is  
 no car no cyclist lying on his back  
 across the white line and now, I,  
 here, fly me to the moon on piano and muted  
 trumpet grate of air conditioning clamped  
 saucepan lid van door low aeroplane  
 did you see what happened and I, now,  
 here, the pock-marked door cold peak of sweat  
 a pen dropped soft definite impact  
 of rain on grass, roofs, tarmac, fences.

*ii*

When I wake, it is there, already querulous and once  
 in a man's burr and once my own voice told me I have raspberries,  
 once a child called my name; a thin, high drift of question.

So loud as if we want to hear. Oh, all your notes have gone  
 to iron mountain, scolding as if disapproval slid out of the walls  
 and all this chat, this theatre of interest – no, not for me.



**Relevé**

A hush attends one gesture, placed like a bowl  
upon the water, leaving only the shadow  
around the words, the halo around the shadow.

She certainly has her accoutrements:  
the intimate, the beautiful, ad hoc,  
unique – and all at twenty percent off.

The foot  
*en pointe*, crushes its toes against a block.

**Rink**

The ice is fluorescent pale in the cloudy day.

Learn its ways:

the ways of its ribbed and guttery places, the long  
cracks and the slight

upward curve in one corner. Practise shifting  
weight from skate

to skate, using the shoulders to turn, scoring  
the surface, grinding

a scouring sound from it, digging out leaves that froze  
after it rained.

Inscribe what you like, or step-fall off, no one  
is looking or cares.

**Autumn Exemplar**

the chimney pots queue up for the morning already  
hauling it up laying it out:  
*the thing about me is... I felt like...*

a bare shiver a loose trail thinning

consent to be silent preserve a quiet house  
self of aura and prestige:

leaf on the precipice of yellow

# Transit

*soft hiss as grey enters faint siren*  
*as orange fades groan in the sky*  
*whip sound of the rails*  
*swelling fading swelling merging*

Was it you I saw?

Was it you?

He left at eight fifteen

No he left

He didn't come back

I went to the station

Railway?

Police

but we can't confirm they said

*tunnels grown to a thunder*  
*carriages grown to a thunder*  
*metal wheels rails carriages thunder*

Can I sit down please?

It wasn't my day

Can I sit down please?

It wasn't my day to go in

Headphones: they didn't hear

if I had –

*release from tunnels clanking*

I wouldn't be wouldn't be

*groan of holding pattern*

wouldn't be

*hiss of tyres*

it wasn't my day

That day no one in class

They showed me the photos after whole

lot of them out by the statue shouting

Was it you?

I opened my bag I showed them

books Look

can I sit down please?

just books

What do you mean, just books?

I saw on tv

I didn't go in it wasn't my day

if I had I wouldn't be  
wouldn't be wouldn't be

*low buzzing rising*  
*out of the tunnels into the roads*  
*down turn-offs down High Streets*  
*shaking the terraces into their cul-de-sacs*

He whipped out his belt yeah  
come up the underpass  
*Fuzz in the ears*  
rolling it right and they're shouting  
rolling it right round his hand  
You what? You call me  
what?

His arm

Who did?

His arm

Whose arm?

His arm moved so fast and

*music by day music by night*  
*the lowest growl announces the rib-cage receives*  
*bass-line drum-beat*  
*filling the road cars*  
*queue for the lights the crossing-sign*  
*beeps like a frightened blackbird*

Come to bed now it's only voices  
come to bed now

Only music

She's off in her dressing gown

*sides of a tank reverberate*

*electric whine a tinted window*

You what?

*electric window opening*

*bass-line drum-beat*

You knocked on the window?

They were fine about it laughing

I see them next day he's pushing the pram

and they wave

Dressing gown

*it scoops you up you are altered*  
*set down without harm the lights change*  
*the traffic moves off*  
*bass-line receding*

Her phone right  
 Right  
 clamped to her ear yeah she said  
 no need to be rude  
 No need to be rude  
*howl of a plane adjusting its speed*  
*the row as the carriages break into sunlight*  
 A D-lock Know what a D-lock is?  
 D-lock Nah  
 Mate, breaking up  
 no D-locks here  
 What?  
 Rude? You're rude, barging into me  
 Yeah Piece of furniture  
 Like I'm a  
 I'm not a piece of furniture  
 Still on the other end to her mate  
 giving it all that  
 giving it all that  
 yeah  
 I said  
 Can I sit down please?

*voices the other end of the carriage*  
*doors crashing shut laughter*

Ladies and gentlemen there is a good  
 I didn't go in it wasn't my day  
 Was it you?  
 I wouldn't be  
 you I saw?  
 wouldn't be wouldn't be

*clatter of carriages faint*  
*curl of a voice*

All right?  
 laughing at me: I said  
 Sorry bad day  
 I just  
 said  
 make sure  
 make sure you're  
 Sorry  
 Was it?  
 Sorry bad day  
 for years and no warning  
 Bastard

knew all about it  
 there you are son, push off  
 till the end of the month and then what?  
 Make sure you're ok  
 Was it you?

*car horns an amplified voice many voices*  
*the faint curl of a siren under*  
*rails metal wheels jolts chains*

Look only books  
 and everyone looking not looking  
 I didn't go in  
 Was it you?  
 it wasn't my day  
 Well *was* it?  
 Liverpool Street  
 Come to bed  
 I got off at  
 only the city  
 Bethnal Green  
*Car horns and a voice many voices*  
*faint in gusts*  
 Are they cheering?

Just voices

*car backfiring sharp against voices*  
*in gusts many voices volley*  
*of gunfire*

Don't make me laugh  
*fog voices swell report of cannons*  
*or guns or*

Couldn't see nothing  
*volley of gunfire as if down a canyon*  
*and shouting or*

Mental  
*snatch of an anthem*  
 grit in the drink we walked  
 The soot people's faces

Too crowded  
 We walked  
*car horns shouting*

*fading*  
 all the way back



*Faint in gusts      a siren*

They shut it all, you couldn't get on

*slow curl of a siren*

The smoke

*sirens*

Was it you?

People's faces

*silence*

*How does a city fall silent?*

*whisper the rain    on roads*

*tyres on wet roads    the rain*

*on awnings    faster    on pavements*

*faster    thunder    bicycle bell    faster*

*car horn    thunder    doors slamming    laughter*

They were all

you know

over each other

all over each other

three years ago    Now it's all

*echoes    recorded voices*

same station    different platforms

over

*trains gathering speed    echoes*

Come to bed

and she hasn't spoken to family for years

Come to bed, love

it's over, there's nothing out there

*tyres on wet roads*

and her Dad steps off    bottom deck of the bus

doesn't see till they're taking the corner

*bell    hiss of wet road    of tyres    lurch*

*of a gear change    faint*

*sound of a train    metal wheels*

*on rails    jolted buffers    and the rising of blades*

*blades beating hard overhead    buzzing low*

It was him

No way

*blades overhead*

*thudding and filling the ears    buzzing low*

It was him    as if

he'd never got on that day    as if

he'd just got up    stepped over the rubble

Twisted metal

burst free of the tunnel    as if

Grey

let fall the jacket    let fall the bag

Yellow cables    gusts

of ash

shirt sleeve flapping    crested the smoke    let fly    like laughing

out past everything touched

*sirens    blades overhead*

your hands

out past everything    circling the city

*sirens    the innards*

*of tunnels    opening wider*

*jet engines tearing    as faint*

*orange    faint grey    is clearing*

*yes    to blue*

Let me see your hands

*and music    bass-line    drum-beat*

circling the city    once

hands in the air

*and voices    a tannoy    the tearing*

*of jets through the air*

Let me see you put your hands in the air

*there is laughter*

*cheering    hand-clapping and faint*

*orange    faint grey    clearing*

*to blue*

Bass line

*scooped up    altered    yes    to blue*

and he laughed

*tearing of jets    scorching cloud*

*faint siren    faint whisper of traffic*

*quietly now:*

and rain and fallen roof tile

and mast and crane    all things

tending upwards

all things

laughed

*spattering out of a grey puddle a foot  
is shaken cycle bell  
fading*

Was it you? I'm here  
I'm alright just lost  
a heel I know bloody shoe

walked the whole way

The soot the dust  
my throat

Changed his name speaks different now  
A plumber, though?

No it was him  
Was it you?

*Tyres in the wet an aeroplane  
banking groaning its figure-of-eight*

Was it you I saw?

*Faint curl of a city clattering hum faint  
roar of a city faint*

Faintly now somewhere

lost you

### III

**Berg**

This wall tower, this shut face  
this absolute rebuttal to 'city'; does it not stir  
a fish flick, bear paw, cut and fin?  
To press against the deck rail  
to want blue-green, deep in the mass  
is to find calling shaken out:  
black tatters from a broken wing.  
Powder stack, compacted crystal repetitions –  
even this call scuds away, is ash scurf on melt water  
krill for petrels, the wake of a ship, mostly prow for searching.

## The Emerald City

So many purposeful rooms! Every surface a mirror:  
the pink mirrors, in which we appear younger;

the grey mirrors, capturing our efficient movements;  
the black mirrors, returning us to our deeper selves.

We lean on balustrades, gaze over balconies. How quaint,  
our houses in the suburbs, our greyer weather. And there:

a man in a cap, shouting beside the motorway,  
a woman haunting the footbridge with her carrier bags.

We too could disappear. The towers could lose us all  
and still have room. We know all this.

We can't stop ourselves. We call it beautiful.

## 5 Lunchtimes

the surface as if broken  
opaque as if solid

or at speed through narrow apertures  
with internal shine

or to think *regal*, her tall form  
a glassy upright

or extravagant volume, tumbling  
bubble edges

or wind-flicked, scattered  
pavement tail

## The Lift

There are no echoes, just the pulse inside your ears  
the crackle as you swallow, leaning against the rail  
catching the smell of those who've gone before:  
perfume, something fried. Like them, you wait  
for your reflection to split when you arrive.

It apes a room, you think. It is not a room. A room  
would never reach inside, throw down your stomach. A room  
could not go anywhere, grant anything. Stare  
into the dimness in the corners. Did you really think  
there were this many floors?



## 5 Evenings

Meniscus in the glass, agitating  
shiny pinballs of talk.

Radio station, warm in the ears, cream tiles  
blue-lit underpass.

Softness falling, house of blue wings, chrome bowls  
float, a flare, awake.

Fuzz orange, muck silver, an overheated hutch:  
someone whispers. No one.

The last seat of the last carriage, station  
lights, track dwindling.

## Hotel Fiorino

A dark room for two days straight, three nights.  
High ceilings, tiled floors, water, sipped – and echoes.  
Morning: metal bucket and mop, hot milk  
being frothed. Midday: heels clacking, the door's double clunk,  
a cup set down on a counter. Evening: burst  
of radio, loud in the courtyard of glossy vines;  
Les Quatres Françaises – laughing, an upstairs window –  
American Youth bumping a suitcase downstairs.

What news from the city? They've kept the middle finger  
of Galileo, enclosed in a white and gold egg;  
the sundial shaped like a moth is still stuck to the bridge  
and crumbling; the boar's nose, rubbed shiny, brings nothing.  
They send up an orange, bread roll – and faint, from the corridor  
sealed to the public, the disbanded mandolin orchestra.

### The Landfill Oracle

They are not levelled absolutely flat, these plains  
where neither salvage nor growth is possible.  
Tractors promenaded the shallow valleys  
and bring their pincers down upon the contours:  
glinting splinters, shreds of wire, fluorescent tubes,  
car batteries, multitudes of gnawed bones and matter –  
how else to describe it? – congealed in greys and browns.

This is a surface that is barely stable.  
Fresh mounds accrue each day, disgorged by trucks,  
picked-at by gulls that rise with each new fall.  
You might mistake them for the plastic bags  
that parachute the thermals up the cliff  
to catch on fences, join the bushes' rippling crops.

The day we are as distant as the gods  
our children will hang over the edge of sites like this  
as – like the gods – we rise in odours and seepages.  
What do we tell them now, with everything  
still so quick, so abundant? None of us  
are able to glean what will most be needed  
nor even what is guaranteed to remain.

**Mall**

Light, as if in water, you are that love song  
exhaled through metal grilles, passing  
down a pavement of infinitesimal joins  
expectant of a view, as of a bay, as of a vista.  
Beneath a sky of pinprick halogens  
with coolness on the skin – your moving shape  
in lengths of curving glass, just as in dream – proceed  
to Food Court, Concierge, Casino, Parking, Pay Here, Exit.

# IV

## 5 Delays

stars, pricking the air above sheds and fences    cherry, early

a green, corrugated wall    lichen on a bridge  
 pebble-dashing  
                                through the open window, a smell of hay

\*

billboards dreaming apartment dwellers laughing on sofas

mounds of brick    waterlogged operator's chair

snow, still, in long grass beside the tracks

\*

double row of poplars across a field    a tree  
 like a cupped-open hand – that's oak

deep-cut stream, rushes, bracken

a woman, red coat, black umbrella    there'll be a dog nearby

\*

new houses, pylon, yellow tractor    a loud voice:  
 it's a free country

                               vats, pipes, gangways, gantries

and home, when is home?

\*

smell of onions    kitchen window  
 then dark again

                               lit clock like the moon

**'Trick or Treat'**

floats between their masks  
and the frayed rim of a paper cup: not  
his mother, not her son, not October.

A restaurant this afternoon (the morning  
in a house; they met, changed clothes – jeans,  
a hood pulled up). The boy holds out a crumpled  
something on which the gaze can't quite fasten.  
A phone goes missing from a table.

The man  
who watches on the pavement makes a call.

The holding cells are waiting, the gates, the yards,  
the corridors, the trays of water beakers, or else  
the van doors opening on different landscapes,  
different times of day, on pockets, shoulder bags,  
a language not their own and if they fail, the men  
who come, or else a pavement by the entrance  
to the Underground, bruises, paper cup.

## Mushrooms Toast Cappuccino

a man in a Fair Isle beanie discards a butt  
from his open window the traffic lights change  
matching cagoules and the rolling walk of sailors  
or those with sore hips want coffee eggs scrambled and toast  
and tomatoes please pinny and jeans steamer hissing  
I haven't seen you you did did I? yesterday  
eggs on toast cup of tea green beads hairband  
sits upright and drinks a slow glass of water the back  
bit iffy this morning sun school guitar  
anorak zipped right up to his neck chews  
on the toggle his Mum come up to me then the teachers  
Dad's on the phone white coffee to go  
the caff rises up door gust at this solo table  
lime trees furling rain and the pavement



## The Fragile

Between moored hulls that knock together  
a cormorant is diving. It surfaces, flips under  
surfaces again. The opaque water  
slaps the dockside, hides the cable ends.

Meanwhile, the city wakes up: car horn, shop shutters.  
The children devise their Knock-Down Ginger, their Bulrush.  
They grin in the street at anyone. Around them  
the buildings fade out, rising from shadow to nothing.

## 5 Mornings

Hooks tearing, dragging the gill, against the current  
 or fire's sting-needle, scouring, charring, raking  
 or boulders jumbling, then wedged in the scoured hollows.

\*

Pause at the foot of the stairs, the midpoint, the top:  
 no one waits with medals, congratulations.

\*

In a chair on the first storey – laminate flooring,  
 golds and blues – while a quiet man explains.

Sash windows, crank and trundle of deliveries.  
*Particulate concentration per cubic metre.*

\*

Carbon, methane, sulphur, nitrogen –  
 how many elements make up a human body?

Chatting in the lift: our worried eyes  
 and halting, hurry-speech. *I feel better.*

\*

The pillow smells of rose and unwashed hair.

Windowframe creak in the sun, common ragwort,  
 salbutamol sulfate. Wipe down the washing line.

## 5 Postcards

The Avenue: a double row of shrubs.  
 Two goshawks tumble round each other, crows  
 keep company with gulls around the goalposts.  
 Real horses pass, a vixen pelts away.

\*

I thought it was a sack and brown bees hovering  
 but they were flies, the cat was dead, his hind legs  
 folded under neatly: a winter coat.  
 That helicopter's low, can't see it either.

\*

A pit bull barrels down the bridleway  
 to rootle out a mangled tennis ball,  
 a couple of cans, an apple core, a bag  
 of chicken bones and nappies from the bin.

\*

'Dear Bess, Just a card to tell you  
 Mrs C wants me to stay until Friday  
 so will make it about the same time Friday  
 evening instead of Wednesday. Much love, Lily.'

\*

Against the Quakers' wall (spraypainted brick)  
 she looks away, his face is in her hair.  
 Inside the wood: a clearing, a marshy pond,  
 the mallard pair tucked between the rushes.

## Charentais

It's cloudy. Tired face in the mirror: a car alarm last night. Garlic on the fingers. Faint hammering streets away, a metal shovel scraped over tarmac. A sparrow on the washing line, a blue tit on the peanut feeder, wood pigeons on the fence. The squash plant takes up half the garden, weeds the rest. It's the first of August, summer turns its wheel, no choice. Plane overhead. Keyboard rattle. I baked bread, I washed some clothes, I did yoga. Rip out those ailing roses, plant a cherry. And the day, let's hoard it, like this melon eaten in slivers; heady elderflower, honey apple.

## Enumerations

### *Looking-down Enumeration*

tarmac train ticket ribwort plantain tree roots oak leaves greater plantain birch  
 leaf rowan leaf bike tyre tread pawprint cigarette butt not there lime flower  
 puddle walking boot print nothing loose foxturd ripped scratchcard pink hairband  
 no answer churned mud hoofprint half-brick holly shadow bark shreds a dog in  
 sunglasses box for a 15" pizza

### *Looking-up Enumeration*

helicopter broom pod field maple hoverfly leaf canopy beech oak jet engine  
 trail sweet chestnut sycamore feral pigeon fraying cloud silver birch bramble  
 flower dead oak limbs tree top silhouette, bending east in the wind hornbeam wood  
 pigeon leaf-mined horse chestnut jackdaw yew frond blue tit banking aeroplane  
 tree bumblebee conker green woodpecker rosebay willowherb, towering wide and  
 constant blue seed and wing broad-leaved everlasting pea

### *Tea Hut Enumeration*

reed mace magpie horse and sweet chestnut human mute swan damsel and  
 dragon fly swallow tetrapak wren grey heron oak jack russell terrier coot  
 algae blackcap lime bread crust starling white china mug cardboard box  
 orange butterfly black-headed gull jackdaw gosling cellophane sweet wrapper  
 bichon frise bramble blue-striped and black and clear carrier bag robin cygnet  
 aluminium can ice cream cone parakeet mallard yellow iris glass and plastic bottle  
 water lily toddler burger carton blackbird tennis ball elder swift native  
 ladybird chip paper grass why stop? fern red earthworm tree and white-tailed  
 bumblebee carrion crow canada and greylag goose and not infinite, no, but countless

**On**

-to the flat bed of an empty trailer sliding past  
to slip through maryland through forest gate  
the yellow metal lantern the last red light  
closing the door through ilford through seven kings  
through goodmayes chadwell heath through romford  
toughened corrugate load unknown thread  
drawn from a scarf through gidea park through harold wood  
and on not stopping three lane motorway alight  
blur of night field mudflats arising sea glint trawler  
migratory birds tanker horizon kelp  
and knotted cord the congress of floating cities  
triton hanjin cosco maersk safmarine open water